

# **Christians in the Holy Land: persecuted under the Palestinian Authority**

## **Lack of Religious Tolerance under the Palestinian Authority**

- The PA Draft Constitution... declares “in the State of Palestine...the religion of Islam will be the official religion.” The Draft Constitution also states that “[t]he Sharia will be the primary source of legislation.”
- The Israeli daily Ha'aretz reported (Feb.28, 2001) that there has been a rise in "vandalism of Christian graves" in the PA-controlled areas. It was also reported that "some fifty Christian families from Beit Sahour [a mostly-Christian town in PA territory] alone tried to emigrate in the last month."
- In April 2002, the Church of the Nativity was invaded by more than 100 Palestinian Muslim gunmen who shot their way inside while attempting to evade capture by Israeli soldiers who had entered Bethlehem to quell on-going terrorism and, in particular, suicide bombings. As confirmed by Abdullah Abu-Hadid, a senior commander in the Tanzim militia, “the idea was to enter the Church in order to create international pressure on Israel.” While inside, gunmen engaged in theft, intimidation, hostage-taking, and vandalism.
- A Palestinian Christian, Ghada Mansour, was formerly the producer of a news show on the PA-controlled Voice of Palestine radio. Mansour said that the news director at the radio station told her that “Christian names should not be included among the obituaries read on the air.”
- Speaking of how her life had changed some two years after the PA took control of Bethlehem, Lina Atallah, a receptionist at the Silesian Convent and Church, described the Muslim attitude toward Christians: “They spit at us, try to force us to wear headscarves, and in the [Islamic] fasting month of Ramadan that begins in a few days, the Palestinian police even arrest us for smoking or eating on the streets....The Muslims want to get rid of us, they want us to live like them.”

## **Economic Injustice towards Christians under the Palestinian Authority**

- According to a Lutheran pastor interviewed on November 15, 2001 in Jerusalem, Bethlehem’s Nativity Square was traditionally filled with Christian stores, but the Muslim boycott has forced many of these stores out of business. Many Muslims, especially members of various ‘security’ forces, are increasingly forcing Christian-owned shops out of business.
- Christians have great difficulty purchasing land or selling real estate they already own to other Christians. Corroborating evidence was furnished by a Palestinian Christian man named Ramzi, who, in a confidential interview in Ramallah, recounted that he had been threatened with death if he sold land to Christians [who wanted it in order to build a new school]. A Christian leader affirmed that “[t]he [PA] Land Law is a threat against us.”
- Sami Abu Aita, a board member of the Bethlehem Chamber of Commerce and Industry interviewed May 9, 2003, told of his own business, the Paradise Hotel in Bethlehem, being destroyed in a gunfight between Palestinian militants and Israeli soldiers. He lamented, “Islamic banks give interest-free loans. No one helped [me] because [the hotel] is owned by a Christian.”

## **Dwindling Christian population under the Palestinian Authority**

- Christians in the Palestinian areas have dropped from 15% of the Arab population in 1950, to just 2% today. Conversely, according to Israel's Central Bureau of Statistics, Israel's Christian population is growing at the same rate as its Jewish population.
- Since the PA took control of Bethlehem in 1994, the city's Christian population has dwindled to just one-third of the overall population. For centuries the majority in the Bethlehem district, Christians have declined from 80% to 20% of Bethlehem's 130,000 residents.
- Palestinian Christians are being "driven out by the steady persecution of the PA and the realization that they will face worse treatment under a possible future Palestinian state."  
-US Congressman J.C. Watts, 1997
- American courts have granted asylum to Palestinian Christians on the grounds that they would be persecuted for their religious beliefs if they return to PA territory. (Jerusalem Report, April 2, 1998)

## **Palestinian Violence and Threats of Violence against Christians**

- "The growing influence of the Islamic movement over Arab society during the intifada has caused growing violence toward Christians and their institutions, deepening the identity crisis of many Christians and their despair over their future in the area."  
-Professor Daphne Tsimhoni, Israel Institute of Technology, 1993
- "Unfortunately for Middle East Christians the extremists look on us as enemies, just as they look upon the Jews as enemies. I have heard fundamentalist groups in Palestine say, 'After Saturday [the Jewish day of rest] comes Sunday [the Christian day of rest]'—and my blood runs cold."  
-Anglican Jerusalem Bishop Riah Abu El-Assal, 1999
- Sana Razi Nashash, a 24-year-old Christian woman from Beit Jallah stated in a August 26, 2002 interview, that she is a virtual prisoner in her own home due to the pervasiveness of [Muslim] harassment of Christian women. "[S]o right now I could not go to the street, even 7 o'clock I cannot go to the street alone, but before [the PA came to power] I used to go and work with no problem at night."
- Commenting on the widespread occurrence of rape by Muslim men against Christian women in PA territory, Inaz Jiries Hanna Muslah, a 23-year-old Palestinian Christian teacher explained that Christian women are sometimes raped with the intention that they will no longer be able to find a Christian husband. She stated, "Some Muslim guys raped many girls, Christian. And...she can't [get] married after that...."
- Ahmad El-Achwal, a Palestinian convert to Christianity, faced repeated harsh treatment at the hands of the Palestinian Authority including imprisonment, severe beatings, arson, intimidation and torture over a seven year period. El-Achwal clung to his religious beliefs and even ran an informal church in his house. El-Achwal was murdered on January 21, 2004, at the entrance to his residence.
- Muhammad Bak'r, a Muslim convert to Christianity jailed by the PA, described his torture in a PA prison. His hands were tied behind his back to a rope connected to the ceiling and he was left hanging there for several days. Although the PA accused Bak'r of selling land to Jews, it is widely believed that he was being held because he distributed Bibles to Muslims. Bassem Eid, Executive Director of the Palestinian Human Rights Monitoring Group, insists that Bak'r's signed confession was elicited under torture.