

Between a Rock and a Hard Place: Anglicans in Palestine/Israel and Christian–Muslim Relations

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This study provides an overview of the current Christian–Muslim relations in Palestine/Israel and the efforts to establish dialogue between the two communities under the Israeli occupation. It takes note of the catastrophic impact of the establishment of the State of Israel on Christians in the Holy Land, their forced expulsion, Israeli anti-goyem policies, and the presence and theological teachings of the Christian Embassy in Jerusalem, as well as the impact of Western Christian support for Israel on the dialogue.

The “Arab Spring” rolled eastward from Tunisia and toppled several autocratic dictatorial regimes, leaving in its wake turbulence and turmoil and in its aftermath what appears to be an increasingly vulnerable indigenous Christian population. Once again the Christians of the Middle East found themselves under scrutiny, caught between discredited regimes that had provided a modicum of security and stability in their lives and new orders struggling to get established with no compass to reveal future direction. As a consequence, insecurity, apprehension, and fear of an unpredictable future have intensified the emigration of Christians to Australasia, Canada, Europe, and the United States, further depleting the number of Christians in the Arab world.

The emigration of Christians from the Arab world to the West is not a new phenomenon. It has its roots in the nineteenth century with the intrusion of foreign powers into the Ottoman Empire and the scramble by the various European nations to claim local Christian communities as protégés to be protected and/or manipulated. Recently it

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has been exacerbated by the Arab–Israeli wars, the rise of Islamist movements in Egypt, civil strife in Lebanon, the consequences of the invasion of Iraq, and the efforts to topple the Assad regime in Syria. The continued decline in the number of Christians in the Middle East has troubled local Christians, and has been noted by Western secular and religious leaders who have expressed concern over the fate of the “vanishing” Christians of the Middle East.¹ The temptation is to blame their emigration on fear of Islamist ascendancy or of real or potential persecution in the area. The devastation of the Iraqi Christian community,² the violent sectarian incidents perpetrated against Copts in Egypt, and the emigration of displaced Palestinian Muslims to traditionally Christian majority towns in the Occupied Territories have all been blamed for the emigration of Christians. It is clear that the emigration has also been spurred by economic opportunities in diaspora. The drop in the relative number of Christians can also be ascribed to their lower fertility rates.

This study will provide a brief overview of current Christian–Muslim relations in Palestine/Israel and of the efforts to establish dialogue between the two religious communities. It will focus on the Anglicans in the context of the general political, economic, and social conditions that have shaped the relationship between Christians and Muslims in the area. The area came under British rule after World

¹ Archbishop of Canterbury Expresses Concern for Middle East Christians,” June 14, 2011, <http://mideasti.blogspot.com/2011/06/archbishop-of-canterbury-expresses.html>. John Hooper, “Pope’s Call for Middle East to Protect Christians Sparks Egypt Fury,” January 11, 2011, <http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2011/jan/11/pope-middle-east-christians-egypt>. Benjamin Mann, “Cardinal Schönborn: Loss of Mid-East Christians would be ‘Tragedy for the Region’,” June 30, 2012, <http://www.catholicnewsagency.com/news/cardinal-schnborn-loss-of-mid-east-christians-would-be-tragedy-for-the-region>. Massimo Franco, “Are Christians Facing Extinction on the Arab Street?,” *The Guardian*, November 1, 2011, <http://www.jmecca.org.uk/node/157>. Alexa West, “Christians in the Middle East: A Minority Victim of the ‘Arab Spring’?,” *Washington Post*, April 29, 2011, http://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/georgetown-on-faith/post/christians-in-the-middle-east-a-minority-victim-of-the-arab-spring/2011/04/29/AFWMcuBF_blog.html. Khaled Abu Toameh, “Muslim Genocide of Christians Throughout Middle East,” *Hudson New York*, November 26, 2010, <http://www.hudson-ny.org/1685/muslim-genocide-of-christians>.

² Joseph Sargon Shamalta, “Unwelcome Guests: An Assessment of Iraq’s Displaced Christians in Jordan,” B.A. Thesis, Georgetown University, 2011; Julianne Darcan, “Iraqi Asylum Seekers in Jordan,” International Catholic Migration Commission, 2007; “Millions in Flight: The Iraqi Refugee Crisis,” Amnesty International, September 2007, <http://www.amnesty.org/en/library/asset/MDE14/041/2007/en/a2989197-d368-11dd-a329-2f46302a8cc6/mde140412007en.html>.

War I and had active Anglican missionary programs which supervised the establishment of churches, schools, hospitals, and other social services.³

Both Palestine and Israel have adopted some form of religious identity. The constitution of Palestine identifies Islam as the foundation or source of legislation, while Israel has no constitution but identifies itself as a Jewish state. Thus religion is coopted by the state and is manipulated through the religious institutions and leadership to buttress its hegemony over the population. This study will review a sampling of Muslim literature and attitudes toward Christian–Muslim relations in general, and will illustrate how interfaith dialogue initially perceived as a new means of subverting Islam is now favored as a means of defending and defining Islam as a religion of peace and one with a historical track record of pluralism and support for religious minorities. It will discuss the development of dialogue initiatives in Palestine/Israel as well as the Anglican contribution to interfaith activities.

Anglican Christians in Palestine and Israel constitute a minority within the minority Christian communities of the Middle East and are a relatively new denomination among the historical established traditional Churches of the East. They are the product of the Anglican missionary project established in the area since the nineteenth century. Like other Middle Eastern Christians they feel a compelling need to repeatedly affirm their indigenous roots and loyalty to the land in the face of growing Muslim anger at Western support for Israel and interventionist policies in the internal affairs of the Middle Eastern states. There is a growing perception within the Islamist community that indigenous Christians are an extension of the colonial interests of Western nations and may represent a disloyal or at least a potential fifth column.

There are no credible statistics on the number of Christians in the Arab world. Estimates vary widely and are contested and politically charged since Christians believe that they are undercounted and therefore underrepresented in the public square. It is estimated that there are between 6500 and 8500 Anglicans in the Middle East, of

³ The Anglicans were allotted Palestine and Jordan as a mission field in the Comity Agreement, which consigned Presbyterian Missionary activity to Syria and Lebanon and the Congregationalists to Turkey and Greece.

whom an estimated 500 to 700 Anglicans live in the Occupied West Bank and some 800 in Israel.⁴

Christian–Muslim Dialogue: The International Arena

Interfaith dialogue events in the Middle East have tended to be perceived by the national governments as political activities that must be monitored by the state fearing foreign intervention and/or sectarian strife. They are also viewed as potential security threats as well as recruiting venues for foreign interests, especially if they have foreign sponsorship or funding. The history of the Middle East reveals special sponsorship of various religious groups by European nations, particularly during the colonial period, claiming protection over different Christian subjects of the Ottoman Empire such as the French over the Catholics and the Russians over the Orthodox. The British, casting about for local patrons, provided support for the Druze. This later precipitated the massacre of Christians in the 1860s as well as British support for Jewish settlement in Palestine driven by political and religious interests: the hope of converting them to Christianity and in the process, creating a local protégé community and/or driven by millenarian expectations.⁵

Christians and Muslims of the Middle East have been engaging in dialogue on both the international and the national scene since the 1940s. They participated in the Cordoba dialogue meetings between Muslims and Christians in 1974 and 1977.⁶ Islamic literature on Christian–Muslim dialogue demonstrates that there has always been apprehension on the part of Muslims regarding interfaith dialogue. Radwan al-Sayyid, a veteran of many dialogue meetings, notes that the invitation to dialogue came from the European and American churches in the 1950s out of fear of Communism. He writes that the first Muslim participants in such meetings were more concerned

⁴ From a private communication from the Rev. Drew W. Schmolzer, Chaplain to the Bishop, The Episcopal/Anglican Diocese of Egypt with North Africa and the Horn of Africa, August 18, 2011.

⁵ A. W. Kayyali, *Palestine: A Modern History* (London: Croom Helm, 1978), 84–119; Abdul Latif Tibawi, *British Interests in Palestine, 1800–1901* (London: Oxford University Press, 1961); Nabil Matar, *Islam in Britain, 1558–1685* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998).

⁶ M. Martin, “The Coptic–Muslim Conflict in Egypt: Modernization of Society and Religious Renovation,” *CEMAM Reports 1: Tensions in the Middle East* (1973): 31–51.

about affirming the recently achieved independence and freedom to operate out of the orbit of the West. The Western Christian dialoguers, mostly Protestant, talked about sharing the faith in the one God and the necessity of fighting Communist atheism. The Muslims, on the other hand, saw the “believing West” as having been complicit in their subjugation during the long period of colonization and in helping plant Israel in their midst. They did not perceive a problem with the Soviet Union and were not convinced of collaborating with the Western Christians against it. The Muslims also had a deep sense of being unqualified to delve into dialogue which required a mutual recognition of equality, a necessary prerequisite for negotiation.⁷

Al-Sayyid also recalls that they were suspicious from the start since the Christian faith is based on the belief in salvation and the church is incapable of seeing salvation in other faiths, therefore Christian dialogues with other religions and ideologies can only be based on “mission.”⁸ They were also aware that Christian dialoguers met with political figures in order to derive mutual benefit for both the church and the politicians. The Muslim dialoguers were deeply aware of Western ambivalence about Muslim social and political concerns. Thus Muslims utilized tactics of focusing on theology and doctrine seeking recognition of the Islamic faith. They also sought to be respected as human beings and proceeded to criticize Western hegemony and the establishment of Israel. Thus the Muslim position was negative and continued to be defensive and confined to airing grievances. Muslims focused on “core beliefs that could not be compromised,” while the Western Christians considered dialogue a beneficial outreach in the context of the “global western control now confronted by Communism whose expansion must be stopped.”⁹

Muslims were also concerned that the initiation of interfaith dialogue by the World Council of Churches (WCC) might be an instrument of the CIA to counter and contain Communism, particularly in light of the fact that John Foster Dulles, U.S. Secretary of State (whose brother was the head of the U.S. Intelligence Agency) said in

⁷ Radwan al-Sayyid, “al-`Alaqaṭ al-Islamiyya-al-Masihīya wa’l-Hiwar al-Islami al-Masīhi: Qira’a min wjhat Nazar Islamiya,” in *al-`Alaqaṭ al-Islamiyya-al-Masihīya: Qira’at Marjī’iyya fi al-Tarikh wa’l-Hadir wa’l-Mustaqbal* (Beirut: Markaz al-Dirasat al-Istratijiyya wa’l-Buhuth wa’l-Tawthiq, 1994), 59.

⁸ Al-Sayyid, “al-`Alaqaṭ al-Islamiyya-al-Masihīya,” 60.

⁹ Al-Sayyid, “al-`Alaqaṭ al-Islamiyya-al-Masihīya,” 61.

his speech at the inaugural meeting of the WCC that preaching Christianity “means that we preach western civilization.”¹⁰

With the collapse of the Soviet Empire, a threat vacuum appeared. Casting about for new potential threats, two publications in the early 1990s generated a great deal of interest in the Arab world. Francis Fukuyama’s *The End of History and the Last Man* (1992) and Samuel Huntington’s article on “The Clash of Civilizations?” (1993)¹¹ identifying Muslim civilization as the potential next enemy that the West would encounter grabbed the attention of the Muslim world and intensified their apprehension about Western interference in the area. Huntington’s analysis was not seen as identifying a new or a potential enemy as much as a renewed targeting of Muslims reminiscent of the missionary-colonial perspectives during the early decades of the nineteenth century, a belief that has been closely held since the publication of the book *al-Tabshir wa-al-Isti`mar* [Mission and Imperialism].¹² Muslims believe that there was close collaboration between the missionaries and the colonial administrators. More recently, many believe that the proponents of the clash of civilization ideology were American Neoconservatives and Zionists who are eager to set the West against Muslims and are bent on destroying Islam.¹³

The forecast of “bloody borders” between Islam and the West predicted by Huntington became a topic of concern for the Organization of the Islamic Cooperation (OIC). Abdul Aziz bin Othman al-Tuwaijri, Director General of the Islamic Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (ISESCO), summed it up in his book *al-Hiwar min Ajl al-Ta`ayush* [Dialogue for the Purpose of Living Together]. He wrote that dialogue “is a necessity in order to develop the relations of the Islamic world with the rest of the world, in order to preserve the primary interests of the Arab and Muslim community, to assure its rights and protect its gains. It guarantees its ability to reap full rewards from its resources and correct the wrong information which is

¹⁰ Rajab Al-Banna, *Al-Aqbat fi Misr wa al-Mahjar: Hiwarat ma` al-Baba Shenuda* (Cairo: Dar al-Ma`arif, 1998), 306.

¹¹ Francis Fukuyama, *The End of History and the Last Man* (London: Penguin Books, 1992); Samuel P. Huntington, “The Clash of Civilizations?” *Foreign Affairs* 72, no. 3 (Summer 1993): 22–49.

¹² Mustafa Khalidi and Umar Farrukh, *al-Tabshir wa al-Isti`mar fi al-Bilad al-`Arabiya: `Ard li-Juhud al-Mubashshirin allati Tarmi ila Ikhda` al-Sharq li-al-Isti`mar al-Gharbi* (Sayda: al-Maktaba al-`Asriya, 1957).

¹³ Al-Banna, *Al-Aqbat fi Misr wa al-Mahjar*, 280.

being propagated about Islam and Muslims and their civilization.”¹⁴ Al-Tuwaijri saw dialogue to be necessary as a defensive measure to establish relations, to protect the resources and interests of the *umma* [worldwide Muslim community], and to correct misconceptions about Islam. Dialogue, he said, should be perceived as a venue to create trust among people of various cultures by opening channels for communication. In that way hostility, particularly during periods of stress and fear, could be alleviated. He posited dialogue as a means of coping with the onslaught of Western hegemony, appearing in the form of globalization that seeks the domination of the world through the spread of Western culture. Dialogue, he said, is a means of coexistence, of collaboration, of genuine respect for the other.¹⁵

Another Muslim leader who advocated dialogue was Mohammad Khatami, former President of the Republic of Iran. In his speech at St. John’s Cathedral in New York on September 5, 2000, Khatami promoted a counter ideology to that posited by Huntington and the Neocons, one that does not see the inevitability of a world hurtling toward a clash but one that will engage in “Dialogue among Civilizations,”¹⁶ in which civilizations collaborate with rather than try to eradicate each other. Khatami’s ideas promoting mutual respect generated a great deal of intellectual activity in Egypt and produced several conferences and books reflecting on his proposals. It also led to the formation of the United Nations Dialogue among Civilizations.

The tragedy of 9/11 intensified interfaith activities and turned them into a growth industry. The need for serious interfaith engagement between Christians and Muslims in the Middle East, particularly after President George W. Bush launched his Global War on Terror (GWOt) became evident, particularly because it was perceived as calling for a new “crusade” against Muslims.¹⁷ While Bush later attempted to equivocate on the term crusade, his words reverberated

¹⁴ Abdul Aziz bin Othman al-Tuwaijri, *al-Hiwar min Ajl al-Ta’ayush* (Cairo: Dar al-Shuruq, 1998), 7.

¹⁵ Al-Tuwaijri, *al-Hiwar min Ajl al-Ta’ayush*, 7. See also Muhammad Mahfuz, *al-Islam, al-Gharb wa Hiwar al-Mustaqbal* (Beirut: al-Markaz al-Thaqafi al-‘Arabi, 2000), and Saud al-Mawla, *al-Hiwar al-Islami al-Masihī: Darurat al-Mughamara* (Beirut: Dar al-Manhal al-Lubnani, 1996).

¹⁶ For a transcript of his speech, see <http://www.unesco.org/dialogue/en/khatami.htm>.

¹⁷ “This crusade, this war on terrorism, is going to take awhile,” Bush said. “Remarks By the President Upon Arrival,” September 16, 2001, <http://georgewbush-whitehouse.archives.gov/news/releases/2001/09/20010916-2.html>.

across the Muslim world and conjured up memories of the century of medieval European Crusades. It also reminded them of the implanting of a Jewish population in Palestine against the wishes of its people. Colonial hegemony was seen not merely as a political and economic venture to control the resources of the area, but as a religious onslaught which brought missionaries and colonial bureaucrats seeking to expunge Islam from Muslims.

The invasion of Iraq and Afghanistan and the propaganda for a GWoT led to ugly commentary on Islam and Muslims in the West that in the age of instant communication reverberated across the Muslim world and generated anger and hostility. (This was not without negative repercussions for Christians of the Middle East, as some began to see them as an extension of Western power.) The characterization of Muslims as terrorists contributed to a victim mentality promoted by Islamists. From this perspective, the Muslim sees himself as a member of a community singled out for oppression and dehumanization by what is perceived as a “Zionist-Crusader” coalition, a Western demon bent on eradicating Islam.¹⁸

The necessity of dialogue between Muslims and the West acquired a further international dimension after Pope Benedict XIV’s Regensburg address, which generated a great deal of anger on the part of Muslims.¹⁹ One of the products of this response was the production of the *Common Word* document signed by several hundred Muslim leaders throughout the world. What came to be characterized as Western Islamophobia was further exacerbated by the publication of cartoons in Denmark deemed derogatory of the Prophet Muhammad and which generated a violent reaction throughout the Muslim world.²⁰

¹⁸ Muhammad al-Ghazali, *Ma’rakat al-Mushaf fi al-‘Alam al-Islami* (Cairo: Dar al-Kutub al-Haditha, 1964); Muhammad al-Hasani and Abul Hasan ‘Ali Nadwi, *al-Islam al-Mumtahan* (Cairo: al-Mukhtar al-Islami li al-Tiba’a wa al-Nashr wa al-Tawzi’, 1977); Muhammad Farag, *Al-Islam fi Mu’tarak al-Sira’ al-Fikri al-Hadith* (Cairo: n. pub., 1962); Muhammad al-Ghazali, *Kifah Din* (Cairo: Dar al-Kutub al-Haditha, 1965); Muhammad Jalal Kishk, *al-Ghazu al-Fikri* (Cairo: al-Dar al-Qawmiya li al-Tiba’a wa al-Nashr, 1966); ‘Abd al-Sattar Fathallah Sa’id, *al-Ghazu al-Fikri wa al-Tayyarat al-Mu’adiya li al-Islam* (Cairo: n. pub., 1977).

¹⁹ Pope Benedict XVI, “Faith, Reason and the University: Memories and Reflections,” Regensburg University Address, September 12, 2006, <http://www.religion.ucsb.edu/catholicstudies/resources/regensburg/pdf/TheSpeech.pdf>.

²⁰ Pernille Ammitzbøll and Lorenzo Vidino, “After the Danish Cartoon Controversy,” *The Middle East Quarterly* 14 (Winter 2007): 3–11.

Muslim–Christian Relations in Palestine/Israel

The establishment of the State of Israel had a catastrophic impact on the Christian population of Palestine. The original Zionist plan was to relocate the Christians living in Galilee to Argentina. While that plan was not implemented during the early settlement of European Jews in the area, the expulsion of the Palestinians became a reality as a consequence of the 1948 war as Palestinians fled before the advancing Israeli terrorist gangs for fear of replication of the massacre of civilians at Deir Yasin, or were driven out. The 1967 war resulted in Israeli forced expulsion of Palestinians from conquered areas, particularly in and around Jerusalem. Furthermore, between 1967 and 2010 Israel embarked on changing the demography of the West Bank by displacing Palestinians and planting Israeli settlements. Israel's demand that it be recognized as a Jewish state continues to place Christians in a tenuous situation as they are not recognized as full citizens of the state. Christians and Muslims find themselves as co-victims of Israeli anti-goyim policies.²¹ The decline of the Christian population is most dramatic in Palestine/Israel. Their number relative to Muslims and Jews also is overwhelmed by the emigration of Russian Jews to Israel and the relentless Israeli expansion into the West Bank, eviction of Palestinians from their homes, and the building of Jewish settlements.

Consequently, the emphasis in Christian–Muslim dialogue meetings is placed on shared history, and on citing references to evidence of friendship, cooperation, and collaboration in the face of what is experienced as a hostile environment.

While the Anglican Church has not initiated independent interfaith activities in Palestine, its leaders have participated in the meetings organized by Al-Liqa' Center in Jerusalem. Bishops Samir Kafiti, Riah Abu El-Assal, and Suheil Dawani and Canon Naim Ateek have participated in interfaith meetings and have delivered papers focused on explaining Christian theology. Al-Liqa' Center in Jerusalem is the only interfaith organization engaged in Christian–Muslim dialogue in Palestine. It organizes two meetings a year bringing together thirty to forty lay and religious leaders. The goal of these meetings is to emphasize the shared destiny and fate of the Palestinian people—both Christian and Muslim; to foster national ties and national unity; to

²¹ See B'Tselem, "Land Expropriation and Settlements," January 1, 2011, <http://www.btsalem.org/settlements>.

initiate a new generation into the national dialogue framed as a shared victimhood; to cry to the world about Palestinian suffering; and to reach Americans who have “eyes that do not see and ears that do not hear.”²²

Al-Liqa’ Center held a conference in Tantur on *Christian Theology and the Local Church in the Holy Land*, July 2–4, 1987. Two issues dominated the meeting: the threat to local Christianity as the community was facing new Israeli policies deemed detrimental to Palestinians, and the presence of the Christian Embassy.²³ Anglican clergy and lay leaders attended the meeting, although none of them gave a paper. The conference was focused on the reality of the Israeli occupation and its policies that foment hatred and enmity. The participants took note that the Israeli government had banned religious Jews from entering churches since they claim that Christianity believes in three Gods: the Father, the Virgin Mary, and Jesus Christ. The other policy noted in their deliberations concerned the order of the Israeli ministry of education given to all Jewish schools to eliminate everything that relates to the New Testament from school textbooks.²⁴

The conference also called for unity to confront the “false missionary campaign that dons the Christian mask” and to confront the Christian Zionists, particularly the Christian Embassy.²⁵ The papers give a sense that the Palestinians feel abandoned by Christians of the West. The conferees felt a grave need to focus the conference on the “local church.” They cautioned that this must not be seen by Western churches as a rebellion against the doctrines of the universal church, but rather as a necessary means of empowering local congregations to understand the true doctrine of the church so as to enable members to respond to questions that current conditions dictate.

The focus on the local church was seen as crucial in empowering Christians to face the various demands, issues, and questions confronting the churches, as well as to manage their tribulation and the frustration of their hopes. The goal was neither to dwell in ossified doctrines nor to improvise and veer from the core teachings of the

²² Gabi Habib, personal interview with the author, September 2011.

²³ See Grace Halsell, *Journey to Jerusalem* (New York: Macmillan, 1981).

²⁴ Jiriyis Sa’d Khoury, “Kalimat Iftitah,” in *Mu’tamar al-Lahut wa-al-Kanisa al-Mahalliya fi al-Ard al-Muqaddasa* (Jerusalem: al-Ma’had al-Maskumi li’l-Dirasat al-Lahutiya-Tantur, 1987), 13.

²⁵ Khoury, “Kalimat Iftitah,” in *Mu’tamar al-Lahut* (1987), 14.

faith.²⁶ Rather, it was to affirm that “we are Arab Palestinian Christians [who understand] the ramifications of that affirmation for our existence,” since Palestinian Christians are constituted of various denominations representing the divisions of the church. The need for church unity regardless of the desires of foreign hierarchies was seen as crucial for the survival of the community. It is to identify the role of Christians in Palestinian society and their relationship to Islam, as one of brotherhood “among the children of one nation: Muslim and Christian.”²⁷

Jiryis Sa'd Khoury, the convener of the conference, raised the grave issue facing the Christian churches as they attempt to maintain the youth in the faith. “How can I as a Palestinian read the gospel which teaches me love and forgiveness to those who harm me and I am harmed daily?”²⁸ He also noted that the literal interpretation of the gospel without understanding its meaning leads the individual to doubt his faith because it is illogical for a human being to accept unceasing oppression and aggression. Young Christians were questioning their faith. “God cannot accept the oppression of his worshipers. He the loving merciful one.” Khoury ended up with a passionate response:

Shall we maintain silence about the oppression or speak loudly about the reality of our life?

The New Testament teaches us to relate to the other with respect, it does not teach genuflection.

The New Testament teaches peace, it does not teach surrender.

The New Testament teaches love; it does not teach hypocrisy.

The New Testament teaches brotherhood; it does not teach artificiality.

The New Testament teaches forgiveness; it does not teach abdication.

²⁶ Jiryis Sa'd Khoury, Rafiq Khoury, Peter Qamary, George Huntilyan, Shukri Sanbar, Adnan Musallam, Munib Yunan, and Yusuf Zaknun, “Al-Wathiqā al-Asasiya: al-Lahut wa'l-Kanisa al-Mahaliya fi al-Ard al-Muqaddasa,” in *Mu'tamar al-Lahut* (1987), 25.

²⁷ Khoury, et al, “Al-Wathiqā al-Asasiya,” in *Mu'tamar al-Lahut* (1987), 27.

²⁸ Jiryis Sa'd Khoury, “Qira'a Filastiniyya li'l-'Ahd al-Jadid,” in *Mu'tamar al-Lahut* (1987), 143.

The New Testament teaches equality; it does not teach discrimination.²⁹

Khoury notes Christian disappointment with “the West” and its abandonment of the Palestinian Christians. He affirmed that the safety of the church is in the people; it rejoices in their joy and grieves when they are sad. It is part of the people of Palestine: both Christians and Muslims. He disapproved of some of the churches who think that the West is the protector of Christians. The question is, “Which West is going to protect Christianity? How does it relate to us? Which Christianity is the West going to protect? Is it the superficial Christianity that has lost its identification with the land and the nation? . . . Furthermore, which West do you like? Is it the West that poisoned the Christians toward Islam and Muslims in the service of its greed and for its interests? Or is the West that conspired against this nation its Christians and Muslims?” He added, “Muslims think that we need the protection of the Christian West. Which Christianity? Which West? The West has conspired against the Christians and Muslims of the East.”³⁰

In the 1990 conference convened by Al-Liqa’, Laurence Carlos Sammour of Bethlehem continued to focus on the Christian Embassy, its theology and its agenda. He categorically distanced the local churches from the Embassy, noting that

1. The Christian Embassy does not represent us; we have not deputized it to represent us; it does not represent the majority of Christians in the world.
2. We reject any political interpretation of the Holy Scriptures.
3. No one can claim to speak in the name of the Christians of the East except the indigenous churches.³¹

He ended his presentation by affirming Christian–Muslim co-existence. “Finally, I want to affirm that the blood shed by our martyrs both Christians and Muslims—which has been mixed in the earth of this precious nation defending its freedom and dignity—is the most

²⁹ Khoury, “Qira’a Filastiniyya,” in *Mu’tamar al-Lahut* (1987), 144.

³⁰ Khoury, “Qira’a Filastiniyya,” in *Mu’tamar al-Lahut* (1987), 143.

³¹ Laurence Carlos Sammour, “al-Qadiyya al-Filastiniya fi al-Watha’iq al-Masihiya,” in *Mu’tamar al-Turath al-‘Arabi li-al-Masihiyin wa al-Muslimin fi al-Ard al-Muqaddasa*, 8th conference, August 2–4, 1990 (Jerusalem: Al-Liqa’ Center for Religious and Heritage Studies in the Holy Land, 1990), 60.

important Christian–Muslim document expressing our joint witness in this Holy Land.”³²

By 1992 Michel Sabbah, Latin Patriarch of Jerusalem, affirmed the necessity for these meetings in order to refute the intensified accusation in the West that Christians are leaving because of intimidation and fear of Muslims. “When asked about this matter, our consistent response has been that the Christian and the Muslim are both Palestinian, one people, one history. Any attempt to discriminate between them is a distortion of history and of the truth that weakens both of them. And the only road to salvation is to seek together for the best way for co-existence in the shade of one civilization and one history, while each is faithful to their beliefs and religion.” For Sabbah, dialogue between the two faiths is necessary to maintain cordial relations, to contain repercussions from events that might precipitate discord, and to maintain confidence among members of the community.³³

Sabbah had earlier addressed the topic of the dilemma in which Palestinian Christians find themselves. “The Palestinian is faced with two majorities: his people, the majority of whom are Muslim, and his conquerors, the majority of whom are Jewish. How do we dialogue?”³⁴ He noted that dialogue proceeds on two levels: the dialogue of life and the theological dialogue with the Muslim. There is a need to coordinate Arab Christian thought to lead to positive cooperation. It should move on two paths. The first should explore the relation between religion and heritage. “We need to ask whether God really calls for people to fight each other as has been interpreted across history. We need a reassessment of our understanding of God and his relation to man and the relation of man to man.”³⁵ He also identified other complicating issues. “There are other concepts that are the result of on-going civilizational conflict in our land such as: evangelization, Crusades, colonialism.” Thus there is a need to clarify what is really

³² Sammour, “al-Qadiyya al-Filastiniya fi al-Watha’iq al-Masihiyah,” in *Mu’tamar al-Turath li-al-Masihyyin* (1990), 62.

³³ Michel Sabbah, “al-Quds Madinat al-Salam,” in *Mu’tamar al-Turath al-‘Arabi li al-Masihyyin wa’l-Muslimin fi al-Ard al-Muqaddasa*, 10th meeting, September 10–12, 1992, The Arab Christian and Muslim Traditions in the Holy Land Conference (Jerusalem: Al-Liqa’ Center for Religious and Heritage Studies in the Holy Land, 1992), 21.

³⁴ Michel Sabbah, “Mulihazat Hawl al-Wathaiq al-Asasiya,” in *Mu’tamar al-Lahut* (1987), 38.

³⁵ Sabbah, “Mulihazat Hawl al-Wathaiq al-Asasiya,” in *Mu’tamar al-Lahut* (1987), 38.

religion and what is politics without alienating the human being from God.³⁶

Reflecting on the same topic, Sammour noted that in dialogue with the Jewish community, Christians need to clarify such questions as: Whose land? Whose promise? He went on to condemn Christian Zionism and local Christian congregations that follow foreign denominations. Christian Zionism, he affirmed, is spurious because it is not indigenous, its ideas are Western, its goals are commercial and political, and it attacks the “traditional” churches. Its adherents do not identify with local sentiments and have reached the point of urging Palestinians to forget Palestine. It is not only that their theology is alien, more importantly, he affirmed, “The Gospel is our constitution.”³⁷

It is clear that dialogue with Muslims is seen by Christians as necessary for political reasons. The goal is not to seek a syncretistic theology as much as it is an attempt to forge a unified front against the grinding Occupation that targets both religious communities, keeping them engaged with the struggle to maintain the needs of everyday living. It also has civic overtones as Muslims and Christians seek to find common ground with those who are co-victims while being attacked by Western Christians who support Israel. At the same time, the indigenous Christians seek to dissociate themselves from Christian Zionism, which undermines their legitimate belonging to the land as it leads to suspicion on the part of Muslims. It seeks to blunt any effort to associate indigenous Christians with Christian Zionists.

For the Palestinians, the engagement with theological issues is crucial in order to refute the claims of Christian Zionism and to affirm that Christianity does not sanction their oppression. Engagement in theology affirms their commitment to be faithful to the message of Christ, even as they seek liberation from an oppressive occupation that legitimizes its policies by reference to the foundations of the faith in the Bible.

Christian–Muslim Relations in Israel

Discussing the unique dilemma that Christians find themselves in Israel, former Anglican Bishop Riah Abu El-Assal of Jerusalem noted that Christians feel constrained by their situation as Christians

³⁶ Sabbah, “Mulihazat Hawl al-Wathaiq al-Asasiya,” in *Mu'tamar al-Lahut* (1987), 38.

³⁷ Laurence Sammour, *Mu'tamar al-Lahut wa'l-Kanisa* (1987), 44–48.

in a Zionist state. They cannot ask for aid from the Arab nations since it would be considered a treachery, nor do they benefit from the aid coming to Israel from the West. "We are caught in between, belonging to neither here or there."³⁸ He noted that Jews around the world make considerable sacrifices to support their fellow Jews in Israel. The Muslim countries are using their great wealth for the benefit of Muslims in Israel and Palestine. Only the Christian community is not receiving similar moral and practical support. "We are perceived as weak, without protection and vulnerable—and in this part of the world, this reflects negatively on the Christian community in general, which loses honour by not protecting its own, quite apart from the fact that the Christian community appears uncaring and therefore unchristian."³⁹

Reflecting the opinion of many Christians in the area, Abu El-Assal noted that they have been sacrificed to atone for European persecution of Jews. "Unfortunately, Christians in Israel are the victims of misunderstandings arising from the poor relations between Christians and Jews in Europe."⁴⁰ Furthermore, they are accused of being anti-Semitic because they protest against Israeli policies. Many in the West "seemed willing to believe the charge, without stopping to think that Christian opposition to the Jews in Israel is founded on real experience of discrimination by these people while the Christians are in the minority, and is in no way to be compared with the European anti-Semitism."⁴¹

Abu El-Assal provides examples of daily encounters of friendship, of collaboration, of sharing, and of service that weaves the Christian and Muslim communities together and alleviates hostility. Reflecting on Anglican services in hospitals and schools that the church runs, he writes, "Our services which are there for everyone, irrespective of faith or creed, provide also a bridge to the Muslim community and are certainly one reason why my relations with the community have been so happy."⁴² He also refers to the "Statement of the Leaders of the Christian Churches in Jerusalem on the Projected Mosque in Nazareth" that notes the political machinations by the Israeli government

³⁸ Riah Abu El-Assal, *Caught in Between: The Extraordinary Story of an Arab Palestinian Christian Israeli* (London: SPCK, 1999), 137.

³⁹ Abu El-Assal, *Caught in Between*, 144.

⁴⁰ Abu El-Assal, *Caught in Between*, 143.

⁴¹ Abu El-Assal, *Caught in Between*, 143.

⁴² Abu El-Assal, *Caught in Between*, 150.

in implementing its policy of divide and rule at times leading to friction. "If some Israeli authorities abuse their government powers to manipulate people's religious sentiments, to divide the population, to create conflict, to foment intolerant fundamentalism; they cannot credibly claim that they can be trusted to respect any religion's Holy Places in their jurisdiction, whether in Nazareth or elsewhere."⁴³

The church in Nazareth is singled out as an example of the machinations of the Israelis to foment discord between Christians and Muslims. The Likud party promised Muslims of Nazareth that if they voted for the Likud, they would give them a permit to build a mosque in Nazareth. Then they proceeded to grant them a permit to construct a mosque near the Catholic Church of the Annunciation. The violence that followed damaged many Christian stores. Sabeel brought groups together for a joint program with Muslims. It also started thinking about issuing a paper "Kairos Palestine" addressing what "we as Christians" can say to our Muslim brothers and sisters. Al-Liqa' in Bethlehem held the first Iftar (breaking of fast) sponsored by Christians. Both Bishop Suheil Dawani and Canon Ateek of Sabeel also held Iftars for Muslims during Ramadan.

The website of the Episcopal Diocese of Jerusalem boasts that Bishop Suheil Dawani established on the day of his enthronement the Diocesan Department for Peace, Reconciliation and Interfaith Dialogue. The goal of the department is:

1. Establish "hot line" procedures of rapid communication among ourselves in order to address and advise government

⁴³ Bishop Riah Abu El-Assal, commenting on the Nazareth mosque building permit, November 28, 2001. "Statement Of The Leaders Of The Christian Churches In Jerusalem On The Projected Mosque In Nazareth," *The Holy Land Foundation* no. 11 (November 28, 2001): 10. The statement was signed by Patriarch Irenios: Greek Orthodox Patriarchate, Patriarch Michel Sabbah: Latin Patriarchate, Patriarch Torkom II: Armenian Apostolic Orthodox Patriarchate, Father Giovanni Battistelli: Custody of the Holy Land, Anba Abraham: Coptic Orthodox Patriarchate, Swerios Malki Mourad: Syrian Orthodox Patriarchate, Paul Nabil Sayyah: Maronite Patriarchal Exarchate, Bishop Riah Abu Al-Assal: Episcopal Church of Jerusalem and the Middle East, Bishop Mounib Younan: Lutheran Evangelical Church, Archimandrite Mtanious Haddad, Greek Catholic Patriarchal Exarchate, Andre Dikran Bedoghiyan, Armenian Catholic Patriarchal Exarchate, F. Elias Tabban: Syrian Catholic Patriarchate.

officials regarding issues of protection of and access to Holy Sites before such issues become cause for conflict.

2. Establish mechanisms to monitor media for derogatory representations of any religion, and issue statements in response to such representations.

3. Together reflect on the future of Jerusalem, support the designation of the Old City of Jerusalem as a World Heritage Site, work to secure open access to the Old City for all communities, and seek a common vision for this city which all of us regard as holy.

4. Promote education for mutual respect and acceptance in schools and in the media. We will sponsor a conference for Israeli and Palestinian educators, academics and Ministers of Education on "The Role of Religion in Educating for Peace: Principles and Practices."

5. Demonstrate through our relations that differences can and should be addressed through dialogue rather than through violence, and strive to bring this message to our respective communities and political leaders that they may embrace this approach accordingly.

6. Provide ongoing consultation to our government leaders, and through the example of our work together remind them that the interests of one community can only be served by also respecting and valuing the humanity and interests of all other communities.⁴⁴

This department provides service through healthcare and education: hospitals, clinics, rehabilitation centers and schools. A department of Diocesan Peace and Reconciliation is tasked with strengthening interfaith dialogue with Muslims and Jews. The diocese also sponsors the Our Kids 4 Peace program, focusing on teaching tolerance and acceptance to the younger generation of ten to twelve-year-old Christian, Jewish, and Muslim kids who come together to engage in fun and artistic activities.

Bishop Dawani, in his capacity as a member of the Council of Religious Institutions of the Holy Land, has been invited by the U.S. State Department to participate in an interfaith meeting. He has also attended interfaith dialogue meetings sponsored by the Washington National Cathedral.

⁴⁴ <http://www.j-diocese.org/index.php?lang=en&page=1296660335722>.

Anglican Exceptionalism?

According to Gabi Habib, former executive Secretary of the Middle East Council of Churches, “The Anglican Church in the Middle East is new in the area and has a small membership compared to the older churches. Any initiative they take would be considered upstaging the older churches.”⁴⁵ This fact is recognized by the Anglican leadership. As Bishop El-Assal put it, “We should not overestimate our own importance. We have often been accused of arrogance and we should be more careful.” The church has a prominent presence in the public square when it comes to the quality of its service which is available to both Christians and Muslims, particularly in education, healing the sick, serving the blind and the deaf as well as eldercare. This is a fact recognized by its members and leaders. As Abu El-Assal noted, “We should not underestimate our own potential, but should serve in the spirit of love and humility.”⁴⁶

The Anglican Church in the United Kingdom, especially under the leadership of George Carey when he was Archbishop of Canterbury, has been in the forefront of initiating high profile interfaith meetings on the international stage. These include the Alexandria Process, in which rabbis, imams, and Christian leaders from the Holy Land gathered under the auspices of Sheikh al-Azhar to pledge to work for peace.⁴⁷ Lord Carey has also initiated the meeting of religious leaders (C 100) at the annual Davos convention of potentates, politicians, and prominent business leaders to reflect on the relations between Islam and the West.⁴⁸ He began the very successful Building Bridges seminar, which brings together Christian and Muslim intellectuals and theologians to reflect jointly on theological topics from both traditions. The seminar has produced several important publications.⁴⁹ Carey also initiated the Al-Azhar–Canterbury dialogue.

Jamal Badawi, a graduate of Al-Azhar, warned about Anglican goals and aims in establishing relations with Muslims. He felt compelled to issue a warning concerning the possible intent of such

⁴⁵ Gabi Habib, personal interview with the author, December 1, 2011.

⁴⁶ Abu El-Assal, *Caught in Between*, 148.

⁴⁷ <http://www.usip.org/programs/projects/alexandria-process#first>.

⁴⁸ http://weforum.org/pdf/C100/Islam_West.pdf.

⁴⁹ http://berkeleycenter.georgetown.edu/resources/networks/the-archbishop-of-canterbury-s-building-bridges-seminar/key_events/key-building-bridges-publications?topic_id=the-archbishop-of-canterbury-s-building-bridges-seminar.

ventures, noting that “one of the special aims of the CMS in Egypt is to gain an influence, with a view to their conversion, over the students of the great university of Al-Azhar, and to bring the youth in general under the power of the Gospel.”⁵⁰

Is the Anglican Church of the Middle East today to be held accountable for its heritage as one founded by British missionaries whose original goal was to bring Russian Jews to Jerusalem and convert them to Anglicanism? Should its members feel that they carry a heavy burden and feel compelled to consistently distance themselves from the statements of the mother church that may support the foreign policies of the British government that are seen locally as injurious to Middle Eastern Christians? While the indigenous church is not seen as complicit in the British plan that culminated in the establishment of the State of Israel, the small number of its adherents in the Middle East keep a low profile in interfaith activities. Most of the activities of local churches have been initiated and financed by outside sources, a fact that adds to their vulnerability.

The Anglican Church in the Middle East feels vulnerable when it is held accountable to the statements made by hierarchies of the church, particularly from “the mother church” in the United Kingdom. The high visibility of Lord Carey in what is seen as political rather than spiritual activities has been criticized by Middle Eastern writers. He is judged for intimating in his remarks that he considers Palestinian resistance to the Israeli Occupation as terrorism. Such a statement is considered not to be in accord with the view of many Christian leaders in the West and the East who experience the oppression and humiliation of the Occupation which discriminates against Christians and Muslims precisely because they are Christian and Muslim. One critic of Lord Carey noted that while most religious leaders sanction the validity of resistance to oppression, Lord Carey ignores the dangerous situation by claiming adherence to a conscience that rejects violence, at the same time equating the usurper and the victim.⁵¹

A statement by Rowan Williams, Archbishop of Canterbury, in a television interview expressing concern about the dwindling presence

⁵⁰ M. A. Fowler, *Christian Egypt: Past, Present and Future* (London: Church Newspaper Co., 1901), 253, as quoted in Sohirin Mohammad Solihin, *Copts and Muslims in Egypt: A Study on Harmony and Hostility* (Leicester: The Islamic Foundation, 1991), 37.

⁵¹ Samir Murqus, *al-Akhar al-Hiwar al-Muwatana* (Cairo: Maktabat al-Shuruq al-Duwaliya, 2005), 102.

of Arab Christians in the Middle East created problems for Anglican Palestinians. While his stated concern for the welfare of Christians was welcomed by the Christian community as recognition of their growing plight, Canon Ateek of Sabeel wrote to the Archbishop expressing Christian appreciation, at the same time affirming the shared Palestinian heritage and destiny with Muslims. However, he took umbrage to the Archbishop's ascribing the steady emigration of Christians from the Holy Land to extremist Islamists. In a letter dated June 23, 2011, he wrote to the Archbishop apprising him of what he considered to be the reality on the ground.

As Palestinian Christians, we perceive ourselves as an integral part of the Palestinian people. We might be a very small religious community nowadays but due to our rootedness in our land, we do not refer to ourselves as a minority. Moreover, as Palestinians, whether Christian or Muslim, we equally live under the oppression of the illegal Israeli occupation of our country. As Palestinians—Christians and Muslims—we share the same hopes and aspirations and we struggle for freedom and human dignity together.

Although as Palestinian Christians, we appreciate the fact that you raised the issue of the vulnerability of the Christian presence in the Middle East—a subject that is dear to our hearts and of great concern to us—you singled out the extremist Islamists as a threat to Christian presence, but neglected to mention two other extremist groups, namely Jewish extremists represented by the religious and racist settlers on the West Bank that are encouraged directly by the present extreme rightwing Israeli government, and the Christian extremists represented by the Western Christian Zionists that support Israel blindly and unconditionally. With candor the last two groups of extremists, i.e. Jewish and Western Christian Zionists are a greater threat to us than the extremist Islamists.⁵²

Concluding Thoughts

Over the years, efforts by Christians to engage Muslims in dialogue have ended up with a few individuals willing to be involved in the process. However, it is not clear what the goal of the dialogue is or

⁵² Letter from Naim Ateek, Director, Sabeel Ecumenical Liberation Theology Center in Jerusalem to His Grace Rowan Williams, Archbishop of Canterbury, Lambeth Palace, London, June 23, 2011; <http://www.sabeel.org/statements.php?eventid=212>.

exactly what anyone involved in it is expecting. The hesitancy on the part of Muslims to participate is based on fear that dialogue is a new twist on ongoing Christian efforts to convert them to Christianity or to lead them into renouncing Islam or at least in deviating from its theological underpinnings. While local Christians may squirm when they are held responsible for whatever Western Christians say, they also welcome efforts to create venues for mutual understanding between Christians and Muslims of the Middle East.

Christians of the Arab world generally do not see any need to hold official dialogue meetings, especially exchanges of theological reflection. They meet Muslims every day; they exchange visits and partake of each other's food. They share each other's pain and hopes for the future. Meetings that focus on probing the depth of what is possible in word games to bring the communities into an artificial consensus on theological issues that both communities can agree on are not appreciated. The theological boundaries of the faiths have been fixed over centuries of polemics and debates. The dialoguers are more interested in what they term the dialogue of life.

Despite the fact that Egypt and Jordan have signed peace treaties with Israel and the fact that other Arab governments have established some form of diplomatic relations, the population of both Egypt and Jordan as well as that of other Arab nations continue to reject normalization with Israel due to what is perceived as the persistent oppression of its Christian and Muslim population. They also condemn its continued discrimination, dispossession, usurpation of their land, and deportation under the longest occupation in history. As Bishop Munib Younan of the Evangelical Lutheran Church noted, "This hatred is spiraling out of control, causing religious and political extremists. It is important that all churches understand the severity of this situation. Every home in Palestine and in Israel is affected at this time either by injury or death in the family, destruction to their homes, parents out of work (70% unemployment, and children living in fear."⁵³

There is no doubt that 9/11 and 7/7 and their aftermath have generated serious consequences for Christian–Muslim relations that are still in the process of unfolding. These attacks on the United States and the United Kingdom have pressured Muslims to think seriously about their definition of Islam, its relations to democracy, pluralism,

⁵³ Editorial, "Christian Leaders Fear Lasting Effects of Conflict," *The Holy Land Foundation* no. 11 (November 28, 2001): 1.

and human rights. There is a growing impetus to engage in dialogue. For most of those engaged, dialogue is motivated by the need to take every opportunity to share with non-Muslims their belief that Islam is not a violent religion. Many are willing to put themselves in what they consider to be an untenable position of listening to heresy and blasphemy (listening to narratives about incarnation, trinity, and crucifixion) in the interest of blunting what they see as a renewed Christian onslaught to wipe out Islam. For many, listening (not hearing) is the price to protect the Muslim *umma*. Thus dialogue has been placed on the Muslim agenda because it affords a venue to defend Islam, and not necessarily because Muslims want to learn about Christianity.

Increasingly, Muslims promote dialogue as an instrument to blunt Islamophobia. Promoters of dialogue believe that stereotypes are perpetrated because of ignorance and that they can be eliminated by knowledge, fear can be mitigated by friendship, and hatred removed by diplomacy. Underlying this is the conviction that once the truth is made manifest ignorance will disappear and harmony and acceptance will prevail. In all this Muslims see themselves as the aggrieved party. While they have repeatedly condemned the attacks of 9/11 and 7/7, they continue to be viewed as complicit in the violence generated by political, economic, and social situations rather than religious.

Despite the shrinking number of Christians in the Middle East they continue to refuse to be categorized as minorities. They demand recognition of their historical roots as the indigenous people of the land and insist that they should be treated as full citizens. For them the purpose of dialogue when they choose to engage in it is to negotiate and maintain a comfortable space in the shared territory for the common good. At the same time, on the local level, dialogue meetings demonstrate disparity in power relationships. While Christians seek to convince the Muslims that they are faithful citizens seeking recognition of the importance of maintaining their status as co-citizen constituents of the nation state, Muslims generally assure them how open, forgiving, and wonderful Islam is. Some of the endeavors are aimed at addressing foreign audiences, agencies, and governments, not to use local Christians as an excuse for interference. They are also aimed at co-nationals affirming allegiance to the state, renouncing foreign allegiance and foreign interference. The emphasis is on commonality and not difference, on a shared past, shared present, shared suffering, shared resistance, and shared destiny.

Finally, the international track offers opportunities for visibility for the participants, and a ready venue to show that one's ideas are taken seriously by the other. Some authors have accused participants of engaging in a smokescreen to cover Western subterfuge, whether led by the CIA to promote American interests or by missionaries trying to sneak back into Middle Eastern countries after they had been kicked out by the nation states. Dialogue events have raised some serious questions about the goals and hidden agendas of such meetings.

