NATIONAL CATHOLIC REPORTER
Published on *National Catholic Reporter* (http://www.ncronline.org)

Politics and Christians in the Holy Land

John L. Allen Jr. | Jun. 14, 2013 All Things Catholic

Given that the Vatican "gay lobby" story was back in the air [1] this week, it may be hard for some to fathom that anything else is cooking on the church beat. Yet there is real news out there, including this: A new threat has emerged to the Christian community in the Gaza Strip, estimated at just 3,000 souls out of a population of 1.7 million.

The Hamas government has issued a ban on coeducational schools, which means that the five Christian schools on the strip, two Catholic and three Protestant, may have to close. Officials insist the decision was not directed at Christians, but they happen to run the only coeducational institutions in the territory.

The Latin Patriarch of Jerusalem, Fouad Twal, plans to meet Gaza's prime minister to appeal the move. Among other things, presumably he'll point out that these Christian schools serve a largely Muslim population.

For purposes of this column, the way I learned about the situation is almost as revealing as the order itself. As it happens, I received an email from the Israeli embassy to the Holy See, passing along a brief article from the *Catholic Herald* in the U.K.

Israeli officials clearly felt the story merited attention, and for fairly obvious reasons: It makes Hamas look bad.

It was a small reminder of a larger point: It's often difficult to tell the full story of anti-Christian persecution around the world and a main reason why is the distorting effect of politics, which tends to bring only part of the picture into view. Nowhere is that more clear than the Holy Land.

Many Arab Christians, in tandem with their liberal sympathizers in the West, emphasize the negative impact of Israeli security policies while downplaying Islamic radicalism. On the other side, Israelis and their conservative allies insist that Israel's Christian population is actually growing while pouncing on every perceived Palestinian outrage.

The truth is that Christians face hardships on both sides of the divide, and often for similar reasons.

In both cases, Christians are a minority in societies defined partly by religion, where suspicions of the "other" are turbo-charged by fear. Without suggesting a false equivalence between the situation for Christians in Israel and in the Palestinian Territories, it's fair to say neither is a walk in the park.

If we're to see reality clearly, we have to stop looking at it through the fun-house mirror of secular politics. It's a lesson that certainly doesn't apply just in the Holy Land, but it's a good place to start.

The following offers some background about the challenges on both sides.

Israel

Christians enjoy greater safety and freedom of action in Israel than most other places in the Middle East. For

instance, the northern region of Galilee is home to a relatively stable Christian presence. In Nazareth, the three-term mayor is a Greek Orthodox Christian, even though the city is about two-thirds Muslim.

It's also true that Israel's Christian population is expanding. Some 50,000 new Christians have recently settled in Israel from the former territories of the Soviet Union, and adding to those numbers are other émigrés from the Balkans and from Asia, especially the Philippines.

Yet many Christians in Israel, especially the native Arab believers, do not describe their situation in glowing terms.

Bethlehem offers a case in point. In 1947, Christians formed between 70 and 85 percent of the population, while today, they're believed to be no more than 15 percent. A 2006 Zogby poll found that 78 percent of the city's Christians say they're leaving because of Israeli occupation while only 3.2 percent attributed it to the rise of Islamic movements.

One frequently cited difficulty involves access to holy sites. Palestinians living in the West Bank and in East Jerusalem hold different residency cards, and they cannot move from one to the other without special permits. As a result, it can be virtually impossible for a Christian in Bethlehem to travel to Jerusalem to worship in the Church of the Holy Sepulchre. That's true during Easter even if a permit is granted, since Easter coincides with the Jewish festival of Pesach, when a security lockdown is imposed.

Residency policies also can have a devastating impact on families. Reportedly, there are approximately 200 Christian families in the area living apart today, their members split between the West Bank and in Jerusalem. Some villages in the region are under military control, which also makes it challenging for family members to move back and forth.

Other difficulties include Christians who have lost land to the construction of Israel's security barrier or to the expansion of Jewish settlements. In 2012, for instance, 3,000 acres were reportedly confiscated from 59 Christian families in Beit Jala to continue expansion of the Gilo settlement and the separation wall.

Hana Bendcowsky of the Jerusalem Centre for Christian Jewish Relations warns of hardening Israeli attitudes toward Christianity. A 2009 survey, she said, found that Israelis between the ages of 18 and 29 hold more negative views of Christians than older generations. They tend to see the Christians in their midst as a "doubly threatening majority" -- part of both the Arab world and of the Christian West.

Among Catholics, there's also frustration about negotiations that have lingered since 1993 over the Fundamental Agreement between Israel and the Vatican, which among other things was supposed to regulate the tax and legal status of church properties. While talks over a deal drag on, Israel has unilaterally declared important Christian sites such as Mount Tabor and Capernaum to be national parks, overriding Christian control.

Bernard Sabellah, a Christian academic and member of the Palestinian Legislative Council, points out that that a recent survey of young Christians in Israel found that 26 percent want to leave -- precisely the same percentage as in the Palestinian Territories.

Christian churches and other sites have also become targets for "price tag" attacks, often carried out by settlers and their sympathizers against groups perceived to oppose the settlements. In December, for instance, vandals spray-painted obscenities at the Monastery of the Cross, a Greek Orthodox church in Jerusalem, along with slogans such as "Jesus is a son of a bitch" and "Jesus is an ape."

Another such assault occurred just yesterday, when an Orthodox cemetery in Jaffa was desecrated [2] with phrases including "revenge" and "price tag" spray-painted onto tombstones. Human rights advocates called on

the government to react to the provocations the same way it responds to expressions of anti-Semitism.

For the record, Israeli officials promptly issued statements deploring the incidents.

The Palestinian Territories

The ban on coed schools announced in early June is merely the latest trial for Christians in the Gaza Strip in the teeth of rising pressures for Islamisation.

In 2007, the only Christian bookstore operating in the strip was firebombed and its owner, Rami Ayyad, kidnapped and murdered. The store had previously been bombed two other times, in February 2006 and April 2007, with the second attack doing substantial damage.

Witnesses said Ayyad was beaten before being killed by Muslim radicals who accused him of attempting to spread Christianity. Called the Teacher's Bookshop, the store had been established by the Palestinian Bible Society, a branch of the Gaza Baptist Church, in 1998.

After the assault, Sheik Abu Saqer, leader of an Islamist group known as Jihadia Salafiya, a group suspected of masterminding the April 2007 bookstore bombing, denied any involvement in Ayyad's killing but accused Gaza's Christian leadership of "proselytizing and trying to convert Muslims with funding from American evangelicals." Although Hamas officials condemned the attack and pledged to protect Christians, the bookshop is no longer a going concern.

Neither is the West Bank free of risks, despite the repeated efforts of the Fatah government to tout their Christian minority as evidence of their openness and worthiness for statehood.

Italian journalist Francesca Paci reported in 2011 that rapidly growing social pressure against mixed Muslim/Christian marriage has meant that unwed couples who have children are increasingly likely to abandon them. She also says that Christian owners of vineyards who have been producing wine for generations face mounting pressure to shift to the more morally acceptable but less profitable business of cultivating olives.

Here's a brief tick-tock of other examples:

- In 2003, a 17-year-old Christian girl named Rawan William Mansour was raped on the West Bank, allegedly by two members of Fatah who were never prosecuted, while Mansour was forced to flee to Jordan out of fear of being the victim of an honor killing.
- In 2005, two more Christian teenage girls, in this case sisters, were raped and murdered.
- In September 2006, seven Christian churches were firebombed amid protests over controversial remarks by Pope Benedict XVI about Islam.
- In 2010, the lone Christian orphanage on the West Bank was shut down under pressure from the Social Affairs Ministry of the Palestinian Authority.

Reports indicate that pressure against Christians is increasing, especially with regard to incidents against Muslim-background believers. Converts to Christianity are frequently discriminated against by the larger community, and often by their own families, if their faith becomes known.

Anyone publicly identified as a Christian can be at risk. In February 2011, a Christian surgeon named Maher Ayyad was attacked when a bomb was hurled at the car in which he was riding. Although Ayyad was unhurt, the car sustained serious damage. Ayyad said that after the attack, he began receiving text messages warning him to stop proselytizing, though he denied doing any missionary work.

Majed El Shafie, president of One Free World International, says that such assaults have become increasingly common. "Christians in the Palestinian Authority [are] facing persecutions," he said. "Their homes, their churches -- they get attacked almost every day."

In other words, the achievement of statehood, at least under present circumstances, would hardly seem to augur an end to the difficulties facing Palestinian Christians. If anything, without the perceived imperative in some quarters to placate Western critics, it could actually make things worse.

Bottom line: Both the Israelis and the Palestinians have work to do in terms of protecting religious minorities, above all Christians. Emphasizing one's shortcomings at the expense of the other is politics, not serious analysis.

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