

PLO NEGOTIATIONS AFFAIRS DEPARTMENT

Bearing the Cross of Colonization: The Via Dolorosa Today

Easter 2013

Introduction

Jerusalem is the center of Palestinian identity and the source of its cultural, historical, and spiritual heritage. It is also the natural socio-economic and political center of Palestine due to its commercial vitality, historical significance, and geographic centrality in connecting the northern and southern parts of Palestine.

From the beginning of the Israeli occupation of the West Bank and Gaza Strip in 1967, a policy of separation and fragmentation has been carried out, in order to “encourage” Palestinians to leave their land and to prevent the realization of the State of Palestine on the ground. In addition to colonizing the land, Israel, the occupying Power, has also implemented a series of changes undermining the social fabric and physical reality of occupied East Jerusalem, in an attempt to turn the city into an exclusively Jewish city. This includes systematic policies of forced displacement, including residency revocation, home demolition and eviction, as well as so-called “excavation works” which damage the rich cultural and religious heritage of Jerusalem, particularly the Old City. At the same time, it includes severe restrictions on freedom of worship for Palestinian Christians and Muslims.

This fact sheet will provide information about the effects of Israeli colonial plans in Occupied East Jerusalem, focusing particularly on its effects on Palestinian Christians.

Depopulation of Occupied East Jerusalem: The Palestinian Christian case

Israel’s stated goal of turning Jerusalem into an exclusively Jewish city has been pursued through several policies that not only threaten the two-state solution, but the very spirit of the Holy City.

The Palestinian Christian population in Jerusalem has dropped from over 30,000 in 1948 to around 10,000 today. This decline has been constant since thousands became refugees from areas in what is now called West Jerusalem (notably the areas of Talbiya, Katamon, German Colony, Baqaa, Masrara and Ein Karem).¹ Since that time, Christian emigration has been a continuous and distressing reality in the Holy Land².

¹The Sabeel Survey’, 47 <http://www.sabeel.org/pdfs/the%20sabeel%20survey%20-%20english%202008.pdf>

²As figures show, in 1945, 117, 450 Palestinian Christians lived in Palestine. Between 1947 and 1949, the Israeli army and militias drove out almost 90, 000 Palestinian Christians, or about two thirds of the population, from historic Palestine, along with hundreds of thousands of other indigenous Palestinians. “The Sabeel Survey.”

Since 1967, several Israeli measures, including zoning restrictions, ID revocations, and home demolitions, have actively undermined Palestinian natural growth in Occupied East Jerusalem. This not only severely affects the ability of a Palestinian to build a home, but also to marry Palestinians from other areas within the Occupied State of Palestine. For example, Palestinians from Bethlehem are no longer free to reach Occupied East Jerusalem. In the case of a marriage between a Jerusalemite and a Palestinian from Bethlehem (or any other area of the Occupied State of Palestine) Israeli restrictions make it extremely difficult for a family to be reunified, particularly after the 2002 Israeli decision to freeze family reunifications. Currently there are thousands of individuals affected by Israeli restrictions on family reunifications - a significant amount of them involving Palestinians from Occupied East Jerusalem and the neighboring Bethlehem and Ramallah areas, where the vast majority of Palestinian Christians are concentrated in Palestine.

Settler organizations, in coordination with the Government of Israel and the so-called Israeli “Jerusalem Municipality” have pursued a policy of colonization inside Palestinian neighborhoods, including the Christian Quarter of the Old City. This has dramatically changed the lives of Palestinians living in such areas, who are now exposed to more land confiscations, restrictions on movement and an increasing wave of terror attacks against Palestinian civilians, as well as acts of vandalism against mosques and churches.

This reality of occupation and colonization has severely impacted the life of Palestinians in general. In a comprehensive study by Diyar Consortium, Christians stated their reasons for emigration as follows: Lack of freedom and security (32.6%); Deterioration of economy (26.4%), Political instability (19.7%), Education abroad (1.6%), Family reunification, Israeli wall and barriers, Religious extremism (0.8%)³.

Besieging the Holy City: Easter time

In order to *de facto* annex Occupied East Jerusalem, Israel has developed several rings of colonial settlements in and around the occupied Palestinian capital. This includes severing its historical ties with Bethlehem, Ramallah and the Jordan Valley. In addition to Israeli colonial settlements, Israel has built the illegal Annexation wall and created a network of movement restrictions that forces Palestinians to apply for permits in order to access their capital city.

Though Israel claims to ensure freedom of worship for all religions in Jerusalem, the reality of the occupied city is radically different. Israeli occupation forces have continued to impose tight closures on Jerusalem, thus sealing it off from rest of the occupied West Bank and denying the access of millions of Palestinians to their religious sites in the city.

During the Easter holidays, Palestinian Christians continue to face movement restrictions in trying to access their holy sites in Occupied East Jerusalem. Access to the holy sites is hampered by several checkpoints imposed by the Israeli occupation forces. According to the Jerusalem Inter-Church Center, only 10% of the 10,000 Palestinian Christian applicants received permits.⁴ In addition, many families were refused access through the checkpoints by Israeli soldiers under such pretexts as “A 14

³‘Palestinian Christians: Facts, figures and trends’, 58 http://www.diyar.ps/media/documents/pal_chr_booklet.pdf

⁴<http://www.oikoumene.org/en/programmes/public-witness-addressing-power-affirming-peace/churches-in-the-middle-east/pief/jerusalem-inter-church-centre-jic.html>

year old child appears older than she/he is”.⁵ Moreover, in 2011, 19 out of 20 scout groups were refused access to participate in Easter processions⁶.

Such restrictions are not only imposed on Palestinians from outside Jerusalem but also on Jerusalemites. For example, during Holy Fire Saturday, one of the most important Christian celebrations in Palestine, the US State Department International Religious Freedom Report found:

*“...Preferential treatment to Jews celebrating Passover and to international visitors making pilgrimages when the authorities enacted restrictions that impeded the activities of local Christians celebrating Easter. Jerusalem Christians had to pass through four police checkpoints before reaching the Church of the Holy Sepulcher; according to Christian advocates, pepper spray was used indiscriminately at the various checkpoints...”*⁷

Similarly, the EU Heads of mission report on Jerusalem 2012 stated that *“The Government of Israel selectively enforces legal and policy restrictions on religious freedom and on access in particular for Christian and Muslim worshippers to their holy sites located in Jerusalem/Old City throughout the year. The separation barrier seriously impedes the work of religious organizations that provide education, healthcare and other humanitarian relief and social services to Palestinians in and around East Jerusalem.”*

The latest Report published by the UN Fact Finding Mission on Israeli settlements found that Israeli restrictions on Palestinian movement, as part of its colonization process, have a direct effect on religious practices: *“Palestinians being denied access to places of worship. Limited entry through checkpoints and area closures during holy days prevents Palestinians from attending holy rituals at appointed times at places of worship.”*⁸

No Palestinian should be forced to ask for a permit in order to visit a part of his or her own country. The permit regime imposed by the Israeli occupation is an attempt to further control the movement of Palestinians while continuing with its colonization plans. This position is shared by the churches in Palestine. Roman Catholic Patriarch Emeritus Michael Sabbah said: *“We look with great concern at the Israeli restrictions imposed on us and on our worshippers' access to the Holy Sepulcher from all over Palestine, and we believe that the Israeli military permits given to some Christians is contrary to the spirit of prayer and the spirit of Easter holiday. The right to freedom of worship is a fundamental human right, and the oppressor ruler has no right to prevent worshippers from praying or restrict their right to the freedom to worship with an imposed permit regime”*⁹

Settler terror against Christian and Muslim holy sites:

⁵Palestinians who are older than 16 have to apply for individual permits. Under the age of 16 they should be permitted to access their Holy sites with their parent(s) on their mother or father's permit.

⁶OCHA, http://www.ochaopt.org/documents/ocha_opt_movement_and_access_report_august_2011_english.pdf

⁷International Religious Freedom report by US State department

2011' <http://www.unhcr.org/refworld/country,,USDOS,,ISR,,502105b15f,0.html>

⁸UN Fact Finding Mission Report on the Implications of Israeli Settlements', January 2013.

<http://www.ohchr.org/Documents/HRBodies/HRCouncil/RegularSession/Session19/FFM/FFMSettlements.pdf>

⁹Interview with Michel Sabbah, March 20, 2013.

Israel's stated goal of an exclusively Jewish city has incited settlers against Palestinians in the occupied city as well as in the rest of Palestine. Thousands of settler terror attacks against Palestinian communities have been registered over the past few years¹⁰. During the past three years alone, more than 147¹¹ attacks were perpetrated by Israeli settlers and occupation forces against the sanctity of Christian and Muslim holy sites in the Occupied State of Palestine.

In 2012, there were more than 90 attacks on holy sites, including an arson attack on the Monastery of Notre-Dame de Sept-Douleurs, in Latrun, and the spray painting of the phrase "Jesus is a monkey" on the monastery door. Hatred and racism has become acceptable for many Israelis. School textbooks and official statements advocating that Jerusalem should be the eternal and undivided capital of the Jewish people, with total rejection of the Palestinian Christian and Muslim identity of the city, have paved the way for gangs of terrorists to attack Christian and Muslim holy sites. This culture of impunity that some countries have granted to Israel has allowed settlers to escalate their racist attacks against Palestinians without any accountability.

The US State department defines Israeli settler attacks as terrorism, and its annual report of 2011 on terrorism in foreign countries cites three main incidents against Muslim sites: the Mamilla Cemetery in Jerusalem, and the arson attacks on mosques in Jerusalem the village of Burqa in Nablus¹².

The UN Fact-Finding Mission on Israeli Settlements found that *"since 2008, mosques and Christian churches have been targeted in price-tag attacks with at least nine price-tag arson attacks against Palestinian mosques and 21 incidents where graffiti was used to desecrate mosques, churches and burial grounds with slogans of a racist or a sacrilegious bent intended to inflame a situation."*¹³

Colonizing the Via Dolorosa

The Via Dolorosa (Latin: 'way of suffering') begins in the old Muslim Quarter of the city and ends in the Church of the Holy Sepulcher. There are 14 stations marking the path which Jesus Christ took before his crucifixion. Each of the 14 stations along the Via Dolorosa is marked with a plaque. Israeli settlers have another way of marking the "Via Dolorosa": through their settlement activity. There are eight stations that can easily be recognized by the presence of illegal Israeli settlements, tens of surveillance cameras and Israeli flags hanging above them. These houses originally belonged to Palestinian families who have been evicted by Israeli settlers supported by the Israeli state.

For example, Station I of the Via Dolorosa is the exit of the tunnel opened in 1996 by Israeli PM Benjamin Netanyahu which runs next to Al Aqsa compound. The tunnel is 330 meters (from the north side of the Buraq Plaza) along the Western Wall, and continues approximately 35 meters north of Al Aqsa mosque, before detouring eastward approximately 16 meters to link with the Via Dolorosa beneath the Omari School. The tunnel was named "Hashmounim", due to the existence

¹⁰ PLO – NAD (2012) "Settler Violence and Israeli Incitement: A Culture of Hate."

¹¹ Palestine Monitoring Group

¹² <http://www.state.gov/j/ct/rls/crt/2011/195544.htm>

¹³ UN Fact Finding Mission Report on the Implications of Israeli Settlements', January 2013.

<http://www.ohchr.org/Documents/HRBodies/HRCouncil/RegularSession/Session19/FFM/FFMSettlements.pdf>

of a 35-meter water stream north of the tunnel that starts from the Sisters of Zion's School (location of the water-gathering pool) believed to have been built during the same period. The other parts of the tunnel consisted of the foundations of Mamluk buildings, on top of which are additional parts dating back to the Crusader or Ayyubid eras, especially the southern part of the tunnel. Discoveries did not reveal any other eras, except for two stones dating to King Herod's era.

The third station is where a Palestinian Christian family was evicted from their home by former Israeli PM Ariel Sharon. At station 5 a heavily protected settlement located over Palestinian homes and shops has changed the landscape of the station, where it is believed by Christians that Jesus fell the first time on his way to the crucifixion. At Station 9 there is a settlement located over the Souq (market) going to Al Aqsa compound, visible from the Coptic neighborhood, while at stations 11, 12, 13 and 14 (Holy Sepulcher) one finds the Moristan settlement, known previously as "Saint John". This confiscation of property led to the forced eviction and displacement of an estimated 44 Palestinian families. Settlers have also attempted to take over a monastery located in front of the Holy Sepulcher.

Israeli plans to change the landscape of the Old City of Jerusalem are clearly visible in the Old City. The presence of armed settlers among defenseless pilgrims and Palestinians and the impunity with which settler organizations act, supported by Israel and the so called "Jerusalem Municipality", is threatening the identity of the city, including one of its most symbolic areas, the Via Dolorosa.

Conclusion

Israeli attempts to consolidate its illegal annexation of Occupied East Jerusalem include several policies aimed at changing the status quo of the occupied city, namely direct attacks against Palestinian presence and the Arab, Christian and Muslim identity of the city. This has led to the forced displacement of the Palestinian population as well as to open attempts to disrupt Palestinian Christian and Muslim celebrations that have been part of Jerusalem's heritage for centuries.

Though several UNSC resolutions call upon Israel, the occupying power, to withdraw from East Jerusalem and consider Israel's annexation of the city to be null and void,¹⁴ the lack of international will to put an end to decades of occupation and colonization have allowed Israel to continue its policies to change Jerusalem's identity. The political, social, economic and cultural consequences of such acts could be severely detrimental if they are not stopped now.

The Via Dolorosa today is a reflection of Palestine's situation. The symbolism of the place and its historical importance has been threatened by Israeli colonization, as has the rest of the Occupied State of Palestine. The dramatic effects of such policies threaten the rich Palestinian Christian and Muslim heritage of Jerusalem, as well as the city's very identity as the focal point of the three Abrahamic faiths for millions of people around the world.

¹⁴Resolutions 242, 338 and 478 among others.