

# The Palestinian Christian Community

## in the Gaza Strip



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Gaza - Palestine 2024 AD

# **PALESTINIAN CHRISTIAN COMMUNITY IN THE GAZA STRIP**

## **HISTORICAL STATUS, NATIONAL ROLE AND REALITY CHALLENGES (Field Study)**

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**Note:**

The work was finalized prior to Operation Flood of Al-Aqsa (10/7/2023) and the Israeli assault on the Gaza Strip, and the devastating impact that it had on Palestinian institutions and society, as well as the Christian population in Gaza.

Following the cessation of the assault in the Gaza Strip, the center will also work on creating a second version of the study that addresses Israeli attacks on the Christian population in the region.



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## Summary of the Study

This study briefs a historical overview and an analysis of the status and national role of the Christian community in Gaza throughout its stages of development. It describes and explains the beginnings of the emergence of Christianity in Palestine, the historical origins of Christianity in the Gaza Strip with its sects and churches, the demographic status of Christians in the Gaza Strip, their status in society, and their role in the Palestinian national movement since the beginning of the Zionist project in Palestine, in which many Christian national figures led resistance to Zionism, and played an important role in the Palestinian revolution and national movement since its inception. Numerous Christian national organizations and figures took part in the 1987 Intifada of the Stones and contributed to the fight against Israeli occupation after 1967. Throughout the Palestinian national struggle, the Christians of Gaza suffered numerous martyrdoms, sacrifices, injuries, and imprisonments.

The study demonstrated the significant contribution that Christian organizations in the Gaza Strip rendered to the resilience of Palestinian society in general and the Christian presence in particular, as well as to the enhancement of Palestinian intellectual and cultural life. These organizations, motivated by their national, moral, and religious impelling, strive to strengthen the Palestinian people's resolve in Gaza through health, education, rehabilitation, and cultural programs and to create an environment that helps enhance the capabilities and skills of Palestinian individuals.

The study explained the challenges and difficulties facing the Christian community in Gaza at both the political and security levels, which is represented by the Israeli occupation and its acts of aggression against the Christian community, the divisions and strifes within the Palestinian community, and its impact on people and society, and its part in raising the rates of unemployment, poverty, and migration among Gaza's Christian community. It also highlighted the economic and social issues that are faced by the Christian community, including poverty, unemployment, lack of employment, and the housing and marital crises, all of which served as further catalysts for the migration of many Christians from Gaza.

**The study came to several findings and recommendations, the most significant of which were as follows:**

1. Hundreds of Christians from Jaffa, Lod, Ramla, and Majdal were displaced to Gaza during the 1948 war after being forced to flee their homes by Zionist gangs.

2. One of the main strongholds of the Palestinian national struggle against the Zionist occupation was the Christian churches and their sects. The Christian religious leaders worked tirelessly advocating for the Palestinian cause domestically and abroad.
3. As a consequence of an array of issues and challenges that have evolved into a fundamental threat to the community, the Christian population in Gaza is steadily declining. It faces a drastic reduction in the years to come. Due to emigration, natural deaths, low birth rates, and the high average age of marriage, the population has declined from 1,688 in 1997 to 1,375 in 2007 to 1,313 in March 2014. For the study year 2023, the population does not surpass 1,023 individuals.
4. The Christian community's levels of social and political engagement in Gaza are drastically declining. Christians are almost completely absent from Palestinian parties and factions' decision-making centers. Additionally, there is a near-complete absence of a substantial Christian presence on the boards of directors of civil society organizations and associations. This is because Christians in Gaza are content to remain in the private sphere, represented by Christian religious and cultural institutions, and remain out of the public sphere as a consequence of the continuing division and internal crisis within the Palestinian community.
5. As far as the Christian community in Gaza is concerned, one of the most significant challenges and hurdles is the occupation and its capricious actions against Palestinian society. For many Christians in Gaza, the occupation is dividing families, preventing people from accessing sacred sites in the West Bank, and obstructing the relationship and contact between prisoners and their families.
6. According to the data, 85.97% of them agreed that the most significant challenge confronting the Christian community in Gaza is the Israeli occupation and blockade. According to 82.46% of them, the ongoing Israeli wars in Gaza are a threat to their lives and the lives of their families, which is the reason they decided to flee the country. When asked if they are considering leaving Israel because of the blockade and wars, 38.59% of them said they are seriously considering it, and 73.69% said that the Israeli occupation keeps the Christian community from exercising its religious rights as a result of the blockade and wars.
7. Strengthening the Christian community in Gaza is hampered by the ongoing internal Palestinian divisions owing to its negative impacts on the Christian population, which are exemplified by the lack of job

security due to the absence of employment opportunities in Gaza and the lack of personal security as a result of numerous unlawful practices. According to the data, 45.61 percent of respondents think that the internal Palestinian conflict and the continuous division pose a threat to the Christian presence in Gaza. While 78.95% think that the rise of religious extremist manifestations poses a threat to the Christian presence in Gaza, 49.12% think that the lack of democratic practices and regular elections prevents members of the Christian community from actively engaging in political and social life.

8. According to the data, the primary cause of emigration from Gaza was the deteriorating economy in Gaza, which caused a lot of issues for the Christian population therein. The economic condition was cited as the primary cause of emigration by 59.6% of respondents, followed by the political and security situation (52.6%). The findings also showed that 77.2% of respondents believed that unemployment and the overall worsening state of the economy are reasons to emigrate. However, 96.49 percent of respondents agreed that the dire economic circumstances in Gaza serve as a driving force for emigration in general, not just among Christians. (78.95%) stated that the largest obstacle to bolstering the Christian community in Gaza is the housing issue and unemployment.

**Additionally, the study suggested several initiatives and measures to strengthen the Christian community in Gaza, which included the following:**

- 1- To improve the reality of the Christian community in Gaza, address its numerous difficulties and crises, increase its involvement in political and societal life, and break the state of isolation, a comprehensive national plan that is developed by a specialized and integrated team (governmental, civil, and researchers) from both inside and outside the community must be adopted. This will combine official, popular, and civil national efforts to strengthen the steadfastness of the Christian community in Gaza.

- 2- The need to assist and encourage young people to join Palestinian forces and parties to increase the political participation of Christian community members in a way that helps them become more involved in Palestinian politics and society.

- 3- To ensure the provision of employment opportunities for members of the Christian community and lower emigration rates, the PLO and the Palestinian Authority must endeavor to assign a portion of public jobs to members of the Christian community throughout Palestine, and in the Gaza



Strip specifically, by integrating them into the PLO's institutions and the Palestinian Authority's ministries operating in the Gaza Strip.

4- allocating a portion of the employment that the Hamas administration in Gaza offers to Christians in an attempt to increase the proportion of Christians in Gaza and strengthen their presence.

5- Five percent of housing developments completed by donor nations should be given to Christian citizens to alleviate the housing issue and support the establishment of stable families, both of which will increase population and lower immigration rates.





## Gratitude and dedication

The Phoenix Center for Research and Field Studies - represented by its president, members, and staff - extends its deepest thanks and gratitude to the Arab Center for Research and Policy Studies - represented by its Director General, the renowned Arab thinker Dr. Azmi Bishara, and its Executive Director Dr. Mohammed Al-Masri - for their generous contribution and assistance in preparing this significant study, which addressed an essential and effective sector of our Palestinian society and its liberation role, namely the Christian community in Gaza in all its aspects.

The Center expresses its deepest gratitude and heartfelt appreciation to the esteemed brothers of the Papal Mission in Jerusalem for their dedicated efforts in the publication and translation of this work, and people from both inside and outside the Christian community in Gaza, including political, community, and civil leaders, who invested time and effort in finishing this study. The Center hopes that this study will help to strengthen the community's steadfastness on the political, economic, and social levels, which will help to preserve the country's cultural diversity and national fabric as well as find realistic and unbiased solutions to the crises and issues that the people of the Gaza Strip face. And Allah, is the Grantor of success.

**Phoenix Center for Research and Field Studies**





## Introduction

Recognizing the historical importance and national role of the Christian presence in Gaza, this study seeks to shed light on the Christian community in the Gaza Strip from historical, institutional, economic, social, and struggle-related perspectives. It is based on a survey conducted by the Phoenix Center for Research and Field Studies, reflecting the center's commitment to strengthening the Christian presence in Gaza and its dedication to enriching Palestinian intellectual and political life through impactful field research.

Applied survey studies have undeniably become vital in the development of modern nations and societies. Their widespread use highlights their value in addressing pressing issues and challenges that demand diverse solutions. These studies represent a systematic effort to describe, analyze, and interpret the current state of a particular group or environment, aiming to generate data and results that can be understood and applied for future purposes. As a methodology, survey studies are instrumental in examining a wide range of political, economic, and social problems and crises, offering innovative solutions and strategies. Moreover, they play a crucial role in resolving these challenges by providing precise information about the study population.

The Phoenix Center for Research and Field Studies operates through diverse research and intellectual programs to deliver high-quality studies, papers, and training initiatives. These efforts aim to address political, economic, social, and cultural issues in Palestinian society with a unique perspective. The center focuses on producing applied field studies in areas such as health, education, economics, agriculture, and climate change, with the goal of serving the community, strengthening the resilience of Palestinian citizens, and contributing to problem-solving using modern scientific approaches.

The study of the Christian community in Gaza is part of the Phoenix Center's annual field studies program. In 2023, the center conducted four qualitative applied field studies, focusing on the marine fishing sector in the Gaza Strip, strokes in Palestine, a health atlas mapping health centers and sites in the Gaza Strip, and the current study on the Christian community in Gaza. The center hopes this study will benefit Palestinian society as a whole, and the Christian community in particular, by contributing to its resilience and addressing the challenges to its continued presence on this cherished land. This community remains an integral part of the political, social, cultural, and historical fabric of Palestine and the Gaza Strip.

**Dr. Khaled Al-Yaziji**  
**Head of Phoenix Center**



## Methodology of the study

### First: Introduction:

Palestine is the cradle of the heavenly religions, and one of the most important locations in the Levant; due to its geographical, religious, social and cultural location, Christianity and Christians have formed an integral part of Palestinian society, and the Christian presence in Palestine is a well-established presence in its history, as Christians view Palestine and its cities as the first and most important Christian center in the world. This view is confirmed by the presence of many churches and monasteries in historical Palestine, especially the Church of the Holy Sepulchre in the Old City of Jerusalem, the Church of the Annunciation in Nazareth, and the Church of the Nativity in Bethlehem, which is a pilgrimage site for Christians from all over the world, and from which the first Gospel was sent to the world, as it is the holiest city in the Christian world.

The Palestinian Arab Christians in Gaza constitute an essential part of the national, societal and cultural fabric of Palestinian society in general, and Gazan society in particular, especially since their roots extend throughout history in this geographical area, which is considered the cradle of the Christian religion in the Middle East, as Christianity entered Gaza in the third century AD, due to it being a coastal area at the hands of Saint Porphyrius.

The Palestinian Christians in Palestine and Gaza He contributed a major role in the Palestinian national movement, since the outbreak of the Palestinian-Israeli conflict, and have contributed to confronting the international conspiracy against Palestine, since the issuance of the Balfour Declaration in 1917 AD, and have led the national struggle in the face of the Zionist project, and have worked to raise the status of Palestine, and push the international community and the free people of the world to confront the threat of genocide to which the Palestinian people are exposed in all places of their presence.

However, despite the major role played by Palestinian Christian Arabs in the Palestinian national struggle movement, the Christian community in Palestine - and Gaza in particular - is now suffering from a set of challenges and difficulties related to the Israeli occupation and its measures towards the Gaza Strip, including siege and wars, in addition to the ongoing division and internal Palestinian crisis, and the emergence of extremist religious discourse by some extremist groups towards the Christian community in Gaza, not to mention the challenges of the deteriorating economic situation

in Gaza, which has prompted large numbers of young people to emigrate in search of better opportunities for life and work. The study of the Christian community in Gaza is not intended to separate this community from its major issues, or to portray it as the only one suffering; rather, it came with the aim of shedding light on it, like the rest of the Palestinian community groups that are being studied, such as women, youth, and refugees. The Palestinian Christian community in the Gaza Strip is part of the larger Palestinian community, and suffers from the siege and division as does society as a whole; however, it has a specificity and special characteristics that distinguish it from the rest of Palestinian society, as several additional challenges have emerged that are in dire need of rapid solutions.

The study of the Christian community in Gaza came in the context of an attempt to analyze the structure of the Christian community in Gaza, clarify the challenges and obstacles it suffers from, the crises and problems that prevent its integration into Palestinian society, clarify the reasons for the increasing waves of immigration among its ranks, and present approaches and mechanisms through which it can contribute to strengthening its steadfastness and survival, at all official, popular, partisan and civil levels.

### **Second: The study problem**

in spite of the historical status and the great national role played by the Christian presence in Palestine throughout the stages of development of the Palestinian national movement, the Christian presence in Palestine - and Gaza in particular - is now suffering from major challenges related to the instability of the political, security and economic conditions in Gaza.

These challenges were linked to the ongoing developments in the Palestinian political arena, especially the continuing division and the repeated Israeli wars on the Strip, and the emergence of cultural and political transformations in the Gaza Strip, in addition to the poor economic and social conditions resulting from the Israeli blockade and the continuing division.

The problem of this study lies in addressing the historical status and national role of the Christian community in Gaza, and the challenges and difficulties of this presence from the political, economic, social, cultural, and religious aspects by answering the following main question: What are the most prominent challenges and difficulties of the Christian community in Gaza in light of the continued Israeli occupation and division? **A group of sub-questions branch out from this question, including:**



1. What is the historical status of the Christian community in the Gaza Strip and the nature of its historical and societal composition?
2. What is the national and political role of the Christian community in Gaza in the Palestinian national movement?
3. What are the most prominent cultural, religious and educational institutions of the Palestinian Christian community operating in the Gaza Strip?
4. How do political, security and economic developments affect the Christian community in the Gaza Strip?
5. What are the motives and reasons for migration? And what are the trends of migration of the Christian presence from the Gaza Strip?
6. How can the steadfastness of the Christian community in Gaza be strengthened at the official and popular levels?

### **Third: The importance of the study:**

Studying the Christian community in Gaza is of great importance on the scientific and practical applied levels, considering the status and role of this community on the political, cultural and social levels. The importance of this study can be determined as follows:

#### **1. The academic importance:**

The scientific importance of this study comes from the fact that it sought to address a new field of knowledge, which is the field of the Christian community in Palestine and Gaza, through studying and analyzing the religious, cultural, social and economic composition of the Palestinian Christian community in the Gaza Strip, and analyzing the reasons for its isolation, anxiety, and lack of involvement in political, cultural and societal life.

Its importance also comes from its role in revealing the political, economic, social and cultural transformations that have occurred in the Christian community in Gaza during the past two decades, in light of the ongoing siege and Palestinian division, which have led to large numbers of people.

#### **2. The practical importance:**

The practical importance of the study comes from the fact that it sought to provide a set of policies, solutions and approaches to the Palestinian decision-maker in Gaza and the West Bank, to enhance the steadfastness of

the Christian community in Gaza. It is also considered a new reference to be added to the Arab and Palestinian library, addressing an important issue from all aspects, and providing practical and qualitative solutions to address many of the crises of the Christian community in Gaza.

**Fourth: The objectives of the study:**

**This study sought to achieve a set of objectives, including:**

1. Shedding light on the national role and historical status of the Christian community in Palestine and Gaza in particular.
2. Knowing the nature of the formation of the Christian community in the Gaza Strip on the religious and social levels?
3. Clarifying the social, political and institutional structure of the Palestinian Christian presence in Gaza.
4. Revealing the institutional, relief, cultural and educational role played by Christian institutions in Gaza.
5. Determining the interconnected relationship between the Israeli occupation, the Palestinian division and the migration of Christians from Gaza.
6. Studying and analyzing the repercussions of the crisis of the Palestinian political system on the Palestinian Christian presence in Gaza.
7. Clarifying the reflection of the poor economic and social conditions in Gaza on the Christian community.

**Fifth: The challenges of the study:**

The research team faced many challenges and obstacles while preparing this study, the most important of which was the lack of information and historical sources that deal with the national and struggle role of the Christian community in the Palestinian national movement, due to the lack of scientific studies that deal with this community and its challenges. The work team also suffered from the state of anxiety and isolation that the Christian community in Gaza suffers from, and the refusal of many religious and community leaders to respond to the researchers. The work team also suffered from great difficulties in filling out paper and electronic questionnaires, due to the lack of response of many members of the community to this research effort; however, in return, they found a welcome from a good number of members of the Christian community in Gaza.



## Sixth: The methodology of the study:

1. **Historical approach:** to establish and search for the historical roots of the Christian presence in Palestine and Gaza.
2. **Descriptive analytical approach:** It is a method of analysis that focuses on sufficient, accurate and objective information about a specific phenomenon or topic, or a known period or periods of time, in order to obtain scientific results, then interpret them in an objective manner that is consistent with the actual data of the phenomenon <sup>(1)</sup>. It is an inductive approach based on observing the political reality, recording and classifying data with the aim of presenting a purely descriptive picture of this reality without interpretation or explanation by the researcher. This approach is used in case studies, regional studies, and public opinion surveys.

The study will use this approach to describe and analyze the structure of the Christian presence in Gaza.

3. **Content analysis approach:** The content analysis approach helps in analyzing the content of interviews, meetings, and focused intellectual meetings to determine the mechanisms and general framework appropriate for the qualitative interventions required to provide mechanisms to strengthen the Christian community in Gaza.
4. **Group approach approach:** This model is based on the assumption that public policy takes its desired path by the group whose degree of influence and pressure increases through the number of its powerful members, the wealth they possess, and the tight organization and power surrounding its structure, considering that the group is the bridge between the government on the one hand and individuals on the other hand, which makes the policy maker - according to this model - driven by the pressure exerted on him by groups <sup>(2)</sup>. The group approach approach will be used to understand the trends of the Christian presence in Gaza, and the relationship between division, wars, and the challenges of economic and social conditions on this presence.

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(1) Duwaidari, Raja, Wahid: Scientific Research: Its Theoretical Basics and Practical Practice, Dar Al Fikr, Damascus, 2000 AD, p. 185.

(2) Al-Manoufi, Kamal, The Origins of Comparative Political Systems, First Edition, Dar Al-Rubaian for Publishing and Distribution, Kuwait, 1987, pp. 149-152. Ochsen Samia, Models and Theories of Public Policy-Making and Decision-Making, Faculty of Political Science, University of Constantine, 2012.

5. **Institutional approach:** To measure the level of institutionalism, Huntington (the American political scientist) proposed four criteria for indicators of institutionalism for political and ethnic parties and groups, which are: the ability to adapt, the degree of organizational complexity and complexity, independence, and cohesion and homogeneity<sup>(1)</sup>. We use the institutional approach; with the aim of studying the Christian presence in Gaza, and the degree of cohesion and homogeneity in this structure in terms of religious, cultural, and social institutions, and the degree of homogeneity of individuals and families with it.
6. **Quantitative and qualitative analysis:** Qualitative research refers to one of the approaches followed in the social sciences that focuses on describing phenomena and understanding them in depth. This research stems from the fact that reality is variable and multiple, and is formed based on the understanding of a group of people. Qualitative research is characterized by a number of characteristics, including: it works to explore social phenomena in their various natural situations and contexts, and emphasizes procedures more than it emphasizes results and outputs. It also focuses primarily on thinking, then measurement comes as a complementary and in-depth process. Among its qualitative/qualitative tools are: using interviews and an in-depth focus group in conducting the qualitative analysis of the study.

#### **Seventh: The limits and time frames of the study:**

1. **Temporal boundaries:** The study period began in 2007 AD - the year in which the Palestinian division occurred - and its limits ended in 2023 AD, the year in which the study and the opinion poll of the Christian community in Gaza were conducted.
2. **Spatial boundaries:** The spatial limit of this study is the Gaza Strip, at the level of individuals, social, cultural and economic institutions, churches and monasteries.
3. **Thematic boundaries:** The framework of this study includes religious, cultural and educational institutions, personalities, and Christian merchants in Gaza.

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(1) Huntington. Samuel. P, "Political Order in Changing Societies" (Bombay: Vatkis Feffer and Siman Pri vate L.T.D., 1975) p.23.



### **Eighth: The community and tools of the study:**

#### **1- The community of the study:**

It is the broader group of people to whom the researcher intends to generalize the results of his study, and the sample is always a subset of this community, and here the Christian community in Gaza, including institutions, individuals, churches and entities, can be considered the broader study community. As for the study sample, it is the group of individuals who actually participate in the study, and these individuals are the ones who are interviewed and focus groups are conducted with or tests and questionnaires are applied to them, as the paper and electronic form was filled out by (97) individuals from the Christian community in the Gaza Strip. In addition, (42) interviews were conducted with political, partisan and community figures from inside and outside the Christian community, including political, cultural, intellectual and community elites, in addition to (2) focus groups that included about (15) women and young men from the Christian community in Gaza.

#### **2- The tools used in the study:**

1. **Personal interviews:** A series of interviews were conducted with individuals and leaders from the Christian community in Gaza, as well as interviews with a number of political and societal elites, and experts in the field of political and economic work, where a team conducted (42) in-depth personal interviews with leaders of national and Islamic work, researchers and experts in political and social sciences, thinkers, and leaders of thought and society.
2. **Focus groups:** (2) focus groups were organized with a number of women at the Al-Nour Cultural Center in Gaza.
3. **Electronic questionnaire:** Given that the study of the Christian presence in the Gaza Strip is considered a survey study, the questionnaire is an important tool in collecting data and primary information for this study. A questionnaire was designed containing a set of questions about the Christian presence in Gaza, through a set of indicators (such as indicators of political, economic and social challenges, national unity, immigration, and security and political pressures). It was distributed to a random sample of (200) (women-men-girls-elderly-youth-) from the Christian presence in Gaza.
4. **Stages of preparing the study:** The study preparation process took place in several stages:



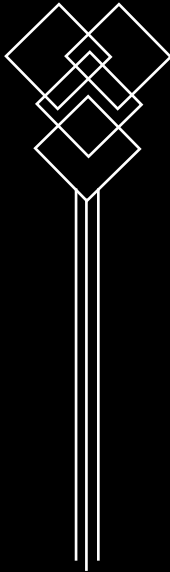
- a. **Collecting quantitative data:** Quantitative data was obtained through an electronic questionnaire that was specially designed using GOOGLE FORMS. Palestinian youth responded to these questionnaires with (57) responses in the electronic questionnaires, and (40) responses in the paper questionnaires. The work team noticed a weak response from members of the Christian community in Gaza.
- b. **Collecting qualitative data:** Qualitative data was collected through interviews and focus groups with elites and political and community leaders in the Palestinian community in the Gaza Strip, including political and community leaders from the Christian community in Gaza, party leaders, and civil and human rights organizations, to learn about the reality and challenges of the Christian community in Gaza.
- c. **Review of related literature:** The research team reviewed the literature related to the Christian community and reviewed the results of the comprehensive survey conducted by the YMCA, the study of the Palestinian Center for Political and Christian Studies, the study of Dar Al-Kalima University in Bethlehem, and other studies that dealt with the Christian community in Palestine and Gaza.
- d. **Developing a first draft of the study and submitting it to the Phoenix Center for Field Studies:** After completing the meetings and focus groups, collecting and analyzing information, filling out and analyzing electronic and paper questionnaires, and receiving comments on the first draft.

### **Ninth: The ethical standards followed:**

**The researchers adhered to a set of ethical standards and principles while preparing this study, which included:**

1. Using the information and data collected within the framework of the research study only.
2. Maintaining the confidentiality and privacy of the information obtained by the study sample.
3. Avoiding any harm to individuals and persons from the study sample as a result of their expressing their opinions.
4. Obtaining prior consent before starting the audio recording, whether for personal interviews or focus groups.
5. Respecting the right of members of the Christian community to view the results and recommendations of the study.





## **CHAPTER ONE**

# **The Historical Roots of Christianity in Palestine and Gaza**

**The first topic: Christianity in Palestine.**

**The second topic: The Christian community in Gaza:  
stages of existence and its religious institutions.**





## Chapter One

### The Historical Roots of Christianity in Palestine and Gaza

Palestine is the birthplace of the three heavenly religions, and has its status and importance to the followers of the three heavenly religions. Christianity in Palestine has a special status as it is the country of the birth of Issa Christ and the place of his mission. Christianity is considered an integral part of the cultural and religious component of the Palestinian people, and it has many Christian religious sites that are a destination for Christians around the world.

Palestinian Christians are an integral part of the Palestinian Arab people. With their presence on this land, they have written a history, status and identity that is closely linked to the history of this land, as they represent an extension of the peoples who have inhabited this land for thousands of years. Palestinian Christians are an essential part of the social, cultural and ethnic fabric, and an important economic factor in the components of the Palestinian economy. They have a well-known political role, and they are an extension of the first church and the first Christians. How could they not be, when this land witnessed the birth of Christ, and was the cradle of the first church? They are deeply spiritually connected to this land, and face the same fate. They played an important role in the Palestinian national movement with their Muslim brothers, in resisting the British mandate, the Zionist movement, and the Israeli occupation and its ongoing violations against the Palestinian people and their Islamic and Christian sanctities.

The Christian community in Gaza - and Palestine in general - are not minorities in their homeland; Rather, they are an integral part of the Palestinian national, social and cultural fabric, especially since the practices of the Israeli occupation have affected them as they have affected others in their capacity as Palestinians, as they have paid the price of their bitter positions and their attachment to the land, and struggled with determination and insistence in institutional work to support their cause<sup>(1)</sup>.

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(1) Palestinian Christians and their contribution to raising the level of human development, 11/22/2016, <https://2u.pw/ls1ZGP2>.

## The first topic Christianity in Palestine

Issa May -Allah's blessing be upon him- was born in Bethlehem. His mother was Mariam, daughter of Imran - Allah's blessing be upon her - whose lineage goes back to David -Allah's blessing be upon him-. Her father was Imran, the leader of the prayer of the Children of Israel in his time. His mother was Hannah, daughter of Faqud, one of the worshippers at that time. Zachariah -Allah's blessing be upon him – was the prophet sent and the husband of Mary's sister, Ash'ya'. It was said that he was the husband of her aunt. When Hannah became pregnant with her daughter Mary, she dedicated her to worship. When she finished breastfeeding, she handed her over to the worshippers who disputed over the matter of her guardianship, because she was the daughter of their leader and leader of their prayer, so that Zachariah -Allah's blessing be upon him - would take care of her, despite his winning the lottery <sup>(1)</sup>, according to what is stated in the Holy Qur'an:

﴿إِذْ قَالَتِ امْرَأَتُ عِمْرَانَ رَبِّ إِنِّي نَدَرْتُ لَكَ مَا فِي بَطْنِي مُحَرَّرًا فَتَقَبَّلْ مِنِّي إِنَّكَ أَنْتَ السَّمِيعُ الْعَلِيمُ ﴿٣٥﴾ فَلَمَّا وَضَعَتْهَا قَالَتْ رَبِّ إِنِّي وَضَعْتُهَا أُنْثَىٰ وَاللَّهُ أَعْلَمُ بِمَا وَضَعْتَ وَلَيْسَ الذَّكَرُ كَالْأُنْثَىٰ وَإِنِّي سَمَّيْتُهَا مَرْيَمَ وَإِنِّي أُعِيدُهَا بِنَاءٍ حَسَنًا وَذَرَيْتَهَا مِنَ الشَّيْطَانِ الرَّجِيمِ ﴿٣٦﴾ فَتَقَبَّلَهَا رَبُّهَا بِقَبُولٍ حَسَنٍ وَأَنْبَتَهَا نَبَاتًا حَسَنًا وَكَفَّلَهَا زَكَرِيَّا كُلَّمَا دَخَلَ عَلَيْهَا زَكَرِيَّا الْمِحْرَابَ وَجَدَ عِنْدَهَا رِزْقًا قَالَ يَمْرِئُمُ آتَىٰ لَكَ هَذَا قَالَ هُوَ مِنْ عِنْدِ اللَّهِ إِنَّ اللَّهَ يَرْزُقُ مَنْ يَشَاءُ بِغَيْرِ حِسَابٍ ﴿٣٧﴾﴾

[Al Imran: 35-37].

Zachariah May -Allah's blessing be upon him - allocated a place for Mary in the mosque for worship that no one but her would enter; in order to choose her - Allah's blessing be upon her - over the women of the worlds, and to give her the good news of the birth of the Messiah, Issa, son of Mary, the Messenger of Allah. A miracle that still speaks of the Creator of the heavens and the earth, who created Christ, May -Allah's blessing be upon him- , from a male without a male, and created all other creatures from a male and a female, after He created Adam, May -Allah's blessing be upon him- , without a male or a female, and created Eve from Adam's rib, May -

(1) Al-Khadri, Amal: Christianization in Palestine in the Modern Era, unpublished MA thesis, Islamic University, 2004, p. 30.

Allah's blessing be upon him-<sup>(1)</sup>.

**Allah Almighty said:**

﴿إِذْ قَالَتِ الْمَلَكَةُ يَمْرَيْمُ إِنَّ اللَّهَ يُبَشِّرُكِ بِكَلِمَةٍ مِنْهُ اسْمُهُ الْمَسِيحُ عِيسَى ابْنُ مَرْيَمَ وَجِيهًا فِي الدُّنْيَا وَالْآخِرَةِ وَمِنَ الْمُقَرَّبِينَ﴾ [Al Imran: 45]

When Mary gave birth to Issa, she went out with him to her people, which surprised everyone. The Qur'anic response to them is:

﴿فَأَشَارَتْ إِلَيْهِ قَالُوا كَيْفَ نُكَلِّمُ مَنْ كَانَ فِي الْأَمْهَدِ صَبِيًّا﴾ قَالَ إِنِّي عَبْدُ اللَّهِ ءَاتَنِي الْكِتَابَ وَجَعَلَنِي نَبِيًّا ﴿٣٠﴾ [Maryam: 29-30]

The Gospel was revealed to Issa May -Allah's blessing be upon him- in eighteen nights, when he was thirty years old, and he was taken up when he was thirty-three years old. His call lasted thirty years, three months, and three days, supported by miracles, He himself is a divine miracle, proof of his truthfulness. His teachings that he gave to the people were not political at all; rather, he sought to reform the society in which he lived, and tried to rid it of the mire of rampant evils, which made them gather around him and listen to his advice.

Issa -Allah's blessing be upon him- was sent to Palestine calling for monotheism, and his followers believed in him and continued to believe for a period of time. Despite the emergence of heretical ideological heresies<sup>(2)</sup>, Christianity is considered the second heavenly religion, and the life of Issa Christ was linked to Jerusalem in an unparalleled way. He used to take his disciples there, and its people welcomed him with great enthusiasm and competed to honor him. Then he began to spread Christianity during the reign of the Roman Emperor Tiberius I, under the rule of Herod Antipas. He faced great difficulties from the Jews who were hostile to him, until he reached the stage of crucifixion, which occupies a deep-rooted place in the Christian faith<sup>(3)</sup>.

(1) Al-Aref, Aref, Christianity in Jerusalem, Jerusalem, Greek Orthodox Monastery Press, 1951 AD, p. 9.

(2) Al-Aref, Aref, Christianity in Jerusalem, Jerusalem, Greek Orthodox Monastery Press, 1951 AD, p. 9.

(3) Al-Aref, Aref, Christianity in Jerusalem, Jerusalem, Greek Orthodox Monastery Press, 1951 AD, p. 9.

The disciples of Christ set out from Palestine to preach the new religion. Despite the resistance of the Jews to the spread of Christianity on the one hand, and the pagan fanaticism towards Christians on the other hand, Christianity began to spread to the outskirts of Palestinian villages and cities<sup>(1)</sup>.

The disciples - the followers of Issa - spread the new religion after his ascension, amidst the persecution that befell them from the Jews and the Romans, which prompted them to hide their religion and sometimes flee with it. The most severe torment and affliction that befell them was during the reign of Nero in 64 AD, and they continued in this state for three hundred years after the ascension of Christ, May -Allah's blessing be upon him -. After the conversion of Emperor Constantine to Christianity, his victory over his opponents, and his issuance of the Edict of Milan in 313 AD, which stipulated religious tolerance, Christianity became on an equal footing with paganism and Judaism, so that every individual would have absolute freedom to choose his religion. Then Christianity was recognized as the official religion of the Byzantine state in 324 AD, so the restrictions imposed on Christians were lifted, which gave Christians the opportunity to move freely, preach their religion, remove pagan monuments from Jerusalem, and build the Church of the Nativity in Bethlehem. His mother Helena built the Church of the Resurrection in the city of Jerusalem.

Caesarea was a center of Christianity due to the large number of Christians there, and was famous for the theological schools that taught Christianity, at a time when Gaza was a center of idol worship in Palestine<sup>(2)</sup>.

The spread of Christianity began to take its course at the end of the fifth century AD and the beginning of the sixth century AD, under the shadow of the Roman Empire that ruled Palestine, during the reign of Emperor Tiberius I <sup>(3)</sup>. At the time when the Jewish religion had turned into something rigid and devoid of spiritual life, and the Roman Empire had its famous laws derived from European laws, as Roman society was characterized by its positive systems and social components, Christianity in the Roman state was not able to establish laws, systems and limits for the complex Roman state and society to follow in the state and society, so it

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(1) Al-Hout, Statement: Palestine, the Cause, the People, the Civilization, Beirut, Dar Al-Istiqlal for Studies and Publishing, 1991 AD, p. 65.

(2) Al-Raheb, Mitri, Arab Christians and the Issues of the Nation: Variables in Context and Roles, Dar Diyar for Printing and Publishing, 1st ed., Bethlehem, Palestine, 2013, p. 88.

(3) Al-Jadba, Fawzi: Fawzi: Religious Services in the Gaza Governorate, a Study in the Geography of Services, Unpublished Master's Thesis, Islamic University, 2016, p. 36.

turned, due to those circumstances, to spiritual refinement and emotional purification, and was interested in this aspect as much as it was concerned with criticizing the rigid rituals and empty appearances in Jewish rituals, and restoring spirit and life to the Israeli conscience.

Christianity did not appear as a religious classification in Palestine except in its liturgy, i.e. service in social worship and prayers of all kinds. The Christian was a Palestinian nationalist who lived through Roman, Byzantine, Islamic, British, and Israeli occupation rule. They had their historical fingerprints in their national vision that historians recorded, mentioned in the records of monks, and passed on by people as an authentic oral history <sup>(1)</sup>. It can be said that Christ and his followers found fertile soil to spread Christianity in Palestine, which was prepared to receive the new religion characterized by humanity, equality, and freedom, principles that were lacking in Roman laws and the state of stagnation and arrogance that existed in the Jewish religion.

### **First: The Historical Roots of Christianity in Gaza:**

Christianity was introduced to Gaza in the fifth century, transitioning from paganism to Christianity under the leadership of Saint Porphyrius, the Bishop of Gaza (395-420 AD). Upon his arrival, he discovered a community of 300 Christians. Subsequently, pagan temples and shrines were demolished, and in their place, the Church of Porphyrius was consecrated on Easter in 407 AD, numerous churches, monasteries, and episcopal sees were established along the coast of Gaza<sup>(2)</sup>.

Gaza has held a special status among Christians since ancient times; This is due to the passage of the Holy Family: Issa Christ, his mother the Virgin Mary and Saint Joseph during their return from Egypt after the death of King Herod, and some studies indicate that the Holy Family rested at the northern entrance to Gaza opposite the old Gaza Citadel, so Christianity entered Gaza since its first era, but it spread slowly<sup>(3)</sup>.

"In the Gospel of Matthew - the first book of the New Testament of the Bible - it is stated: 'And after they had departed – the Magi – an angel of the

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(1) Abu Al-Dinin, George Anton, Murad Al-Zeer: The Christian Encyclopedia of National Figures, Active Christians in the Twentieth Century, Baghdad Cultural Library, 1st ed., 2022 AD, p. 23.

(2) Al-Zaim, Ibrahim: Peaceful Coexistence between Muslims and Christians in Jerusalem 1897-1994 AD, Darie E-Kutub, 2019 AD, p. 83.

(3) Al-Sarraf, Faraj Bashara: "Christianity and Gaza," as one of the main cities in the Holy Land, 1993, Gaza, p. 9.



Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream, saying: 'Arise and take the young child and his mother, and flee to Egypt and stay there,' for Herod wanted to destroy the child, so the child went out with his mother by night to begin the journey from Bethlehem to Egypt, as mentioned in the Gospel of Matthew regarding the events of the journey. Mary took an unfamiliar route to mislead Herod's soldiers, heading from Al-Arish to Farama, until she ended up at Mount Qusqam in the Assiut region of Egypt, where the Monastery of Al-Muharaq is located. They stayed there for three and a half to four years, and then the family returned to Palestine. On their way back along the coastal route, they passed through the city of Gaza. There is a narration that the Holy Family rested during the afternoon under a sycamore tree located to the north of Gaza, and that tree was called the 'Good Sycamore,' leading to the popular saying: 'Good Sycamore, O separator of friends.' Then Issa lived in Nazareth, and he was referred to as: Issa of Nazareth." <sup>(1)</sup>

"Among the early bishops of Gaza was Bishop Philemon, to whom Saint Paul sent one of his letters, indicating that the inhabitants of Gaza embraced Christianity since the early Christian era. Also, there was Bishop Silvanus, the first bishop mentioned in history for the city of Gaza, who was martyred along with twenty-nine Christians in 310 AD during the reign of King Galerius. Saint Hilarion (290-371 AD) built the first monastery established in Palestine in the city of Deir al-Balah in 329 AD and provided assistance to the poor in the city, where only 280 Christians lived among seven thousand pagan inhabitants of Gaza. This means that the spread of Christianity in the city of Gaza was extremely difficult due to the fierce conflict between paganism and Christianity within the city." <sup>(2)</sup>

The participation of one of the bishops of Gaza City in the Council of Nicaea came to confirm the important role of the Christians of the Gaza Strip. It was the first ecumenical council in 325 AD, and was held to refute the claim of Arius, who denied the divinity of Christ. One of the bishops of Gaza also witnessed the second ecumenical council in Constantinople in 381 AD, and approved the rejection of the teachings of Macedonius, the enemy of the spirit. He approved the Creed against the heretics of that time. A representative from the Church of Gaza attended the third, fourth, and fifth ecumenical councils during the period from 451-553 AD <sup>(3)</sup>.

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(1) Al-Mubayyid, Salim Arafat: "Christianity and Its Effects in Gaza and its surroundings," Palestine, 1998, p. 41.

(2) Ibid, p. 44.

(3) Al-Sarraf, Faraj Bishara: Ibid, p. 11.

When Islam spread in Palestine in the year 15 AH/636 AD, Omar bin Al-Khattab came and received the keys to the city of Jerusalem from Sophronius - the Patriarch of the Romans at that time - to liberate Jerusalem and its people from the clutches of the Romans, who agreed to hand over the city to the Commander of the Faithful Omar bin Al-Khattab with their consent, and the Omar Covenant was established with its tolerant terms, and since that date the Arabs in Jerusalem and Palestine, Muslims and Christians, have lived together<sup>(1)</sup>. According to the principles of the Covenant of Omar, Christians enjoyed:

1. Freedom to practice their religious worship and rituals.
2. Respect for their places of worship, churches and monasteries.
3. Coexistence with Muslims and freedom to work and move in a spirit of great religious tolerance.

There are many examples of peaceful coexistence between Muslims and Christians in Palestine and Gaza. The intertwining of the buildings between the Church of Porphyrius and the Mosque of the Governor - separated only by a common wall - is the greatest evidence of that<sup>(2)</sup>.

The continued presence of Christians in Gaza as a major religious sect since the Islamic conquest and throughout the Islamic eras is evidence of the strength and solidity of Islamic-Christian relations, and the absence of any instances of discrimination against them or treatment of them as a second class in society.

The state of peaceful coexistence between Muslims and Christians in Palestine was not limited to one city, but rather an atmosphere of love and tolerance between the two parties prevailed in all Palestinian cities. This came in application of the tolerant Islamic Sharia, which urged brotherhood, coexistence, acquaintance, and dialogue between followers of other religions, and recommended security, peace, and security.

﴿وَلَتَجِدَنَّ أَقْرَبَهُمْ مَوَدَّةَ لِلَّذِينَ ءَامَنُوا الَّذِينَ قَالُوا إِنَّا نَصْرِيَّ ذَلِكَ بِأَنَّهُمْ قِسِيَّينَ  
 وَرُهْبَانَا وَأَنَّهُمْ لَا يَسْتَكْبِرُونَ﴾ [Al-Ma'idah: 82].

(1) Sabry, Akram: Embracing the Cross and the Crescent, Christians and Muslims Together for Jerusalem, Palestine, Jericho, 2003, pp. 9, 10.

(2) Draghmeh, Ayman: Palestinian Arabs, Christians in Gaza as a Model, 2022, p. 8.

**As Allah Almighty said:**

﴿عَامَنَ الرَّسُولُ بِمَا أُنزِلَ إِلَيْهِ مِنْ رَبِّهِ ۚ وَالْمُؤْمِنُونَ كُلٌّ آمَنَ بِاللَّهِ وَمَلَائِكَتِهِ وَكُتُبِهِ ۚ وَرُسُلِهِ ۚ لَا نَفَرُوا بَيْنَ أَحَدٍ مِّنْ رُّسُلِهِ ۚ وَقَالُوا سَمِعْنَا وَأَطَعْنَا ۚ غُفْرَانَكَ رَبَّنَا وَإِلَيْكَ الْمَصِيرُ﴾  
 .[Al-Baqarah: 285] ﴿٢٨٥﴾

Christianity also urged, through its principles, to spread love and hate hatred. That is, Islam was not the only one to include principles of tolerance. Christianity contained in its Gospel many principles: “Be kind to one another, compassionate and forgiving, and Allah in Christ will forgive you.” “Live with people in such a way that if you live, they will be compassionate toward you, and if you die, they will weep over you.”<sup>(1)</sup>

Arif al-Arif also points out that during the period of the end of the Crusades, the intensity of the conflict between Muslims and Christians subsided, their hearts were reconciled, and they lived with each other. “I would like to mention the city of Gaza in particular, for you cannot distinguish between one of them and the other, neither in his food, drink, clothing, sleep, or customs. There is no difference between a Muslim and a Christian”<sup>(2)</sup>.

The Ottoman regulations equated the sects, the first of which was in the Decree of the Imperial Line in 1856 AD, and paid special attention to the Christians in Palestine at a time when the competition between the Western Christian churches was at its peak, which prompted the Ottoman authorities in 1858 AD to take several measures against the scholars and dignitaries of Gaza, and to bring them before the Mutasarrif of Jerusalem who came to Gaza specifically, and ordered their detention as punishment for what some of the city’s residents had done in attacking the gate of the Greek Orthodox Monastery Church in protest of some changes being made to it, and the painting work inside the church, relying on old legal provisions that prohibited such work.<sup>(3)</sup>

It can be said that the state of tolerance and harmony among Christians in the Gaza Strip characterized the Islamic historical periods. Even during the Crusades, relations between the two parties remained rooted, as the friendly

(1) Abu Al-Hajj Thabet: Peaceful coexistence between Muslims and Christians, the city of Jerusalem as a model, Al-Janan Magazine, Issue 7, Lebanon, 2015, p. 44.

(2) Al-Aref, Aref: History of Gaza, Jerusalem, 1943 AD, p. 94.

(3) Alexander, Schulz: Radical Transformations in Palestine 1856-1882 AD, 1st ed., Dar Al-Huda, 1990 AD, p. 314.

nature based on love and good neighborliness prevailed among the members of Palestinian society due to demographic interactions, which were followed by social, economic, political, and cultural integration relations to become a society with a strong, interconnected national bloc embodied by the Islamic-Christian bond.

### **Second: Christian sects in Gaza:**

There are three Christian sects in Gaza: the Orthodox, the Latins, and a few Baptists.

#### **1- Orthodox sect:**

Their church is called the Greek Orthodox Church, or the Eastern or Greek Church, because most of its followers are from the Eastern Romans and from the Eastern countries such as Russia, the Balkans and Greece. Its original headquarters was Constantinople, and it separated from the Catholic Church during the days of Michael Carolarius, Patriarch of Constantinople in the year 1054 AD<sup>(1)</sup>, It is one of the oldest Christian sects that lived in Palestine, since the early years of Christianity. The Patriarchate was founded in 451 AD. They are the ones whose Patriarch Sophronius agreed to hand over the city to Omar bin Al-Khattab, as the majority of the residents of Jerusalem were Orthodox Christians<sup>(2)</sup>, The Greek Orthodox sect is the most widespread among Christians in the Gaza Strip, and many service, relief and educational institutions are affiliated with it.

It was called by this name because at its inception, the nationality of all the inhabitants of this country was Roman, and Palestine was part of this Eastern Roman Empire. The word Orthodox is a Greek word that means in Arabic “straight-minded” and “followers of the right faith” in religious terms. This word began to be used in the early centuries to distinguish followers of the Orthodox sect from other Christian sects. After the division of the church into Eastern and Western in the eleventh century AD, the Eastern Church became known as the Orthodox Church, and the Western Church as the Catholic Church, which is also a Greek word meaning the universal church<sup>(3)</sup>, The Orthodox sect is one of the oldest and most numerous Christian sects in Palestine, and many of its families go back to the ancient Arab tribes of the Ghassanids and the Taghlaba. From the first

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(1) Shalaby, Ahmed: Comparative Religions 2, Christianity, Egyptian Renaissance Library, Cairo, 10th ed., 1998, p. 238.

(2) Al-Zaim, Ibrahim: Op.cit, p. 90.

(3) The Palestinian Encyclopedia, General Section, Damascus, The Palestinian Encyclopedia Authority, 1st ed., 1984 AD, Vol. 1, p. 141.

century AD until the Ottoman rule in 1517, the leadership of the sect remained Arab national, until Greek monks - with the help of the Ottoman authorities - were able to control the Patriarchate, bring one of the monks to the position of Patriarch, and color the Patriarchate with Greek, and then they controlled most of the holy places in Jerusalem and its environs with the support of the Ottoman state<sup>(1)</sup>.

It is noteworthy that President Yasser Arafat granted the Greek Orthodox Church a plot of land next to the Al-Amin Muhammad Mosque in the Tal Al-Hawa area to build a church on it; however, construction has not yet been completed for several reasons: the most important of which is the refusal of the neighborhood residents to build the church, and therefore the plot of land remains empty<sup>(2)</sup>.

The Greek Orthodox sect is the most widespread among Christians in the Gaza Strip, and many service, relief and educational institutions are affiliated with it.

## **2- The Catholic community "Latins":**

The second largest Christian sect in the Gaza Strip. Catholicism entered Gaza in the nineteenth century, and before that date there were no Latin Christians in Gaza. Their arrival began during the Egyptian rule of Palestine 1832-1840 AD, when Father Mauritan arrived in Gaza in 1869 AD, after which the parish was officially opened in 1879 AD. After Father George Gat arrived in Gaza, an Arab house was rented for five years, then a plot of land of five dunams was purchased in 1880 AD, at a time when the number of Latins was 71 people<sup>(3)</sup>, The parish was built in 1882 AD, and then the church was built in 1966 AD at the Latin Monastery in the Zeitoun neighborhood.

The followers of this sect gained complete independence from the Greek Orthodox, after several attempts made by the oppressed Patriarch Maximus III. He was also able to liberate his sect from the authority of the civil Armenian Patriarch in 1845 AD, after he obtained from the Ottoman Sultan Abdul Majid a patent of his civil authority over the Greek Catholics<sup>(4)</sup>.

The Catholic Church: It is the Western Church or the Latin Church or the Petrine or Apostolic, and its meaning is universal or general, and because it

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(1) Al-Sarraf, Faraj: Op.cit, p. 41.

(2) Interview with Ayyad, Kamel: Gaza, Palestine, 9/14/2023.

(3) Madabia, Peter: Op.cit, p. 25.

(4) Al-Zaim, Ibrahim: Op.cit, p. 91.

is the only one that spreads Christianity in the world, and it was called Latin or Western because its influence extended to the Latin West, especially the countries of Italy, Belgium, France, Spain and Portugal, and Catholicism follows the papal system, and is headed by the Pope and the Cardinals, who are the first and last holders of the right to organize the Church, as they are composed of the Church Council that issues supreme papal revenues that are divine wills, because the Pope is the greatest disciple of Christ on earth, and hence his revenues are not open to debate or discussion<sup>(1)</sup>.

**As for the reason for the division of the Church into Orthodoxy and Catholicism, it is due to religious and political reasons:**

A. Emperor Theodosius divided the Roman Empire into two parts in 395, a western one with Rome as its capital, and an eastern one with Constantinople as its capital. After his death, his first son Arcadius became emperor of the eastern empire in 408, and his second son Honorius became emperor of the western part. This division provided Christianity with two centers of power and influence, and the new capital took the place of the rival capital, Rome. B. The fall of the Western Roman Empire due to the barbarian attack on it in 476 AD gave the Church of Rome an opportunity to add political influence to its religious influence

B. . It claimed that it had the right to rule the entire Christian world, and did not accept sharing influence with the Church of Constantinople. The Western Church declared that its head was the supreme pontiff and spiritual head of all; however, the Eastern Church did not accept this, and thus recognized its progress and primacy.

C. The religious reasons lie in the fact that the Eastern Empire was connected to the land of religions, and Christianity flourished there for a long time, and it went through long historical stages. As for the Church of Rome, it was influenced by German blood and the spread of Christianity among the pagans, while the churches of the East were influenced by Eastern thinking and the spread of Christianity among the ancients of religions, so the dispute between the two churches began, then it began to grow and increase when the Church of Rome was lenient in its analysis of eating strangled blood, and when it permitted monks to eat pig fat in order to attract Germans and non-religious people, which the Eastern churches did not accept<sup>(2)</sup>.

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(1) Shalaby, Ahmed: Op.cit, p. 239.

(2) For more on the nature of Christian schisms, see Shalabi, Ahmad: op. cit., pp. 241-242.

The state of division within the church resulted in the emergence of many Christian sects and movements, which deeply affected the relationship between the Christian churches, and a fierce competition emerged between them throughout the historical ages, reaching the point of excommunicating each other.

### **3- Baptist denomination:**

Protestantism spread in Germany, England, Denmark, Holland, Switzerland, Norway and North America, where the English believed that the Reformation movement was a just and rational movement, and that it was the origin of what the Catholic Church should be. Therefore, the English retained the use of the word Catholic Church for the churches that were the product of the Reformation movement without needing to call them Protestant. To differentiate between the name of the English churches and the original Catholic Church, they called the Church of Rome and its followers the Roman Catholic Church. The Protestant Church follows a cooperative system, meaning that its members cooperate in leadership and preaching, without affecting the autonomy of each church<sup>(1)</sup>.

The beginning of the emergence of this movement in Palestine dates back to the year 1820 AD, when they began preaching in Jerusalem and were in a difficult situation because their faith was not officially recognized, and they remained so until Muhammad Ali ruled the Levant in 1831 AD, and he allowed them to practice their missionary activity. As for their real emergence, it was in the year 1841 AD in the city of Jerusalem, where it began after negotiations took place between the King of Prussia, Frederick William IV, the Queen of Britain, and the Archbishop of Canterbury, William Hawley, to establish a joint Protestant bishopric in Jerusalem<sup>(2)</sup>.

The Baptist sect is one of the smallest Christian sects in Gaza. Their numbers are very small. There is no specific number for them, especially after the assassination of Rami Ayyad, the accountant of the Bible Library, in 2007 AD, and the emigration of more than 25 of their families, leaving only 5-7 people left<sup>(3)</sup>. Others claimed that this sect does not exist in itself, and they reject its activity in Gaza, which is carried out by some of its members among the people of Gazan society through the aid provided by

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(1) Shalaby, Ahmed: Op.cit, p. 242.

(2) Al-Zaim, Ibrahim: Op.cit, p. 93.

(3) Interview: Tarzi, Jamil: Former Head of the Surgery Department at Al-Shifa Hospital, and current member of the Municipal Council 8/31/2023 AD.

the Evangelical Baptist Church<sup>(1)</sup>.

Although there are three Christian sects in Gaza, there is a closeness between them, and they are united by friendly relations, love, and competition to serve their country and people.

### **Third: Christian archaeological sites in the Gaza Strip:**

Archaeological discoveries have indicated the existence of a long-standing Christian historical heritage in the Gaza Strip, as archaeological discoveries dating back to the fourth century AD were found, including the Monastery of Saint Hilarion in the Nuseirat camp in the middle of the Gaza Strip, the founder of Christianity in Palestine, and the Byzantine Church in Jabalia, which is considered one of the most important churches in the Gaza Strip.

#### **1- St. Hilarion Monastery:**

It is the first and most important of the ancient monasteries in Palestine. It is located on a high hill of sand 15 km southwest of Gaza City, and 3 km west of the city of Nuseirat. Archaeological excavations in Palestine have shown that the Hilarion Monastery is one of the largest monasteries found in Palestine in terms of area and design, with an area of 8 dunams<sup>(2)</sup>, Saint Hilarion was born in a village called Tabana or Tabatha, which is about 7 km from the city of Gaza. When he wanted to head towards the city of Alexandria, he met on his way Saint Anthony, the founder of monasticism in the Egyptian desert, and became his disciple. Then he returned to Palestine, and he established a hermitage for himself at the site of Khirbet Umm Amer in 329 AD. Within thirty years, Saint Hilarion's popularity increased, and he was surrounded by 400 deacons - a rank in the church - and they began to organize some modest buildings around the monastery<sup>(3)</sup>.

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(1) Interview: Saba, Suhail, Member of the Church Council of Representatives, Gaza, Palestine 7/3/2023.

(2) Archaeological Guide, Gaza Hashem, Sham Gate, Ministry of Tourism and Antiquities, Gaza, 2022 AD, p. 42.

(3) Abu Rukba, Muhammad: The Archaeological Guide to the City of Gaza, Beit Al-Sahafa Foundation, Gaza, 2022 AD, p. 11.





**Figure (1): A picture of the site of St. Hilarion Church, southwest of Gaza City**

With the arrival of the Roman Emperor Julian to the throne in 360 AD, who was classified as an apostate from Christianity, he destroyed the monastery and forced Saint Hilarion to flee to the island of Cyprus, where he died. Then one of his disciples transferred his body to the city of Gaza, and buried him in his cell in Khirbet Umm Amer in the city of Nusairat<sup>(1)</sup>.

The monastery consists of three architectural parts, the first of which includes the service area in the southern and western parts, which are rooms for the clergy residing in the monastery, consisting of a mosaic floor of architectural archaeological value, the second represents the church that was planned according to the basilica style consisting of three aisles, while the third and final part is called the Dimas, which can be reached through a staircase, most of whose steps have disappeared, and it leads to an underground building in the shape of a cross, in which the marble columns that make up the monastery appear, the place includes the remains of the marble sarcophagus of Saint Hilarion in the Roman style, in addition to the baptismal basin and the bath area, waiting rooms, and the fire house in which the water is heated.

During the period from 1967 to 1995, the Monastery of Saint Hilarion was robbed by the Israeli occupation forces. Most of its archaeological artifacts, which represent the legacy of the Palestinian people and one of their usurped rights, were looted. These artifacts were transferred to Israeli museums as part of the falsification and fight against the Palestinian

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(1) Archaeological Guide, Gaza Hashem, Sham Gate, Ministry of Tourism and Antiquities, Gaza, 2022 AD, p. 43.

narrative. The monastery, or Umm Amer Hill, is one of the most important Christian religious landmarks in the Arab world, which confirms the depth of civilization and the ancient history of Palestine<sup>(1)</sup>.

In 2018, excavation, maintenance and restoration work was carried out at the monastery by the Ministry of Tourism in cooperation with the French Evangelical Archaeological School in the city of Jerusalem<sup>(2)</sup>, In partnership with the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), funded by the British Council, the Cultural Protection Fund for the Protection, Preservation and Promotion of Historical Archaeological Sites in the Gaza Strip, under the auspices and supervision of the Palestinian Ministry of Tourism and Antiquities, work on the monastery continued for two years with a budget of approximately one and a half million euros. More than 75 employees and workers were recruited, including international and local experts, technicians in the restoration of antiquities, academics, students and graduates of history and antiquities departments from universities in the Gaza Strip. They were trained in the restoration of antiquities, building a wall for the monastery, and restoring the mosaic floors and stones of the monastery buildings such as the shrine and the church<sup>(3)</sup>.

### **2- Byzantine Church:**

It is located in the town of Jabalia, and is considered one of the most important churches in the Levant that have been discovered, west of Salah al-Din Street. Its area is 500 square meters. It was built in 497 AD, during the reign of the Byzantine Emperor Anastasius, who ruled between 491-518 AD. The church continued to exist since the Islamic conquest of Palestine in 15 AH/637 AD. The church included 16 written texts in ancient Greek writing, and this number was not found in any church in the Levant at all. The largest church in it contained only eight or nine texts<sup>(4)</sup>.

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(1) Al-Jamal, Muhammad: The Monastery of Saint Hilarion in Gaza, an ancient monument that resists extinction, 6/30/2018, <https://2u.pw/2RTSTh3>.

(2) Archaeological evidence: 0p.cit, p. 47.

(3) Baroud, Hoda, Beginning of the restoration of the first Christian monastery in Gaza, 4/12/2018, <https://2u.pw/Z6D8vCB>.

(4) Abu Rukba, Muhammad: 0p.cit, p. 8.



**Figure (2): Mosaic from the Byzantine Church site in Gaza**

The mosaic floor of the church contained many geometric and plant decorations, human drawings, rural scenes, kitchen utensils, and domestic and predatory animals in Palestine and abroad. It included hunting scenes, rivers, and palm trees, which were inspired by Roman mythology. The church was built on the three-aisled basilica system. The church contains the place of worship on the north side, in addition to the baptismal basin. This church was visited by Egyptian Christians to pray in it, and it was not spared from the Israeli bombing in 2014, as parts of it were destroyed and need restoration<sup>(1)</sup>.

In 2010, the Ministry of Tourism and Antiquities in Gaza installed a canopy to protect the mosaic floors from erosion. In 2017, a program was launched to restore and give historical value to the site, and to cover the mosaic floors of the church. Wooden walkways and bridges were built to enable visitors to see the floors without walking on them, under the management of the International Relief Organization, with the participation of the French Evangelical and Archaeological School in Jerusalem, and with the support of the British Council<sup>(2)</sup>.



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(1) Gaza revives 1,600-year-old Byzantine church, 1/24/2022, <https://2u.pw/sYrBSit>.

(2) Archaeological evidence: 0p.cit, pp. 49, 50.



## The second topic

### The Christian community in Gaza: stages of existence and its religious institutions

The Christian community in Gaza has grown and developed like other communities through various historical stages, most of which have shaped this deeply rooted Christian presence in Gaza. The state of stability and security in life has led to the establishment of religious, cultural, and educational institutions that represent a cornerstone and a major component of the larger Palestinian society.

#### First: Stages of development of the Christian presence in Gaza:

The Christians of the Gaza Strip are divided into three groups: The first: the original Christians of Gaza, who have lived in Gaza for hundreds of years and consider it their original town. Their families have roots in the origins of the families of the Gaza Strip. They lived around the Church of Pereferos and the Latin Monastery in the Zeitoun neighborhood - part of which is known as the Christian neighborhood - and they resided in old houses that are no less than three hundred years old, some of which still exist today, and most of them indicate the antiquity and antiquity of the presence of Christians in the city of Gaza<sup>(1)</sup>, Their number was estimated at about 300 individuals, out of about 5,000 Palestinians who lived in the middle of the Strip before the Nakba occurred. As for the second group, they immigrated during the Palestinian Nakba in 1948, like the rest of the Palestinian people who were subjected to expulsion and displacement from their villages and homes. Most of the Christian immigrants who headed to Gaza in their migration were from Palestinian cities, specifically from Jaffa, Lod, Ramla, Sabaa, and Majdal<sup>(2)</sup>, The population of the Gaza Strip then quadrupled.

A large number of Christian refugees tried to cross into Egypt, but the Egyptian army prevented them from completing their migration, so they settled in Gaza City. Along with those migrants, seven Egyptian theology students from the Beit Jala Institute arrived, where they lived in the monastery for a month before continuing on their way to Egypt. Father Shukri Surur received 280 families, approximately 800 people, including 150 Christians<sup>(3)</sup>, Then Father Shukry traveled to Egypt to collect donations,

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(1) Al-Sarraf, Faraj: Op.cit, p. 54.

(2) Interview: Saba, Suhail, Member of the Church Council of Representatives, Gaza, Palestine 7/3/2023.

(3) Madabia, Peter: Op.cit, p. 40.

and he established more than one workshop in the monastery for the benefit of the displaced, including textiles and other things.

When the refugees stayed in the Gaza Strip for a long time, a Palestinian priest who had immigrated with them from Beisan went to the Egyptian governor and asked him to allocate a plot of land for the Christians to live in and build a church on. The church and the Vatican institutions took over the construction of a Christian camp on the outskirts of the Beach Camp, which was called the Christian Quarter. It began as tents and then turned into a building with an area of each house of 100 meters to preserve their entity in one complex and their religious identity within this quarter, which was built under the supervision of the Orthodox and Catholic Churches and the Vatican institutions. They provided them with assistance, as special streets of three meters were allocated to them according to the camp pattern, and then the Christians were transferred to this camp<sup>(1)</sup>.

When UNRWA began providing aid to Palestinian refugees, it did not recognize the Deir al-Latin camp, so Father Hanna al-Nimri built a school for children with 145 students<sup>(2)</sup>, Faraj Al-Sarraf called for help<sup>(3)</sup> With the Quaker Humanitarian Services Foundation for the relief of Palestinian refugees who have sought refuge in the Gaza Strip, due to his relations with Christian and international institutions in the United States and Western countries, Hani Farah says about this: “Many Christian refugees have obtained a food ration card from the Relief Agency; but most of them do not benefit from it or from the services provided by UNRWA”<sup>(4)</sup> ‘This is because Christian institutions and churches cared for Christian immigrants, and their relatives, citizens of Gaza, worked to accommodate them among them, and many of them were able to secure work early on.

The third section reached the Gaza Strip with the return of the late President Yasser Arafat and the establishment of the Palestinian National Authority in 1994<sup>(5)</sup>, Some of them were recruited within the Palestine Liberation Organization in the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan, Syria, Lebanon, Algeria, and Yemen, and some of them reached high positions in the Palestinian

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(1) Interview with Al-Tarzi, Atta: Op.cit.

(2) Madabiel, Boutros: Op.cit, p. 43.

(3) Faraj Al-Sarraf: Born in Beersheba in 1919, he obtained his Matriculation Certificate from the Friends School, obtained a law degree and worked as a lawyer in land laws and civil law in Gaza in 1950, Abu Al-Dunin, George Anton, Murad Al-Zeer: Op.cit, p. 525.

(4) Interview: Farah, Hani, Secretary General of the YMCA, Gaza, Palestine 4/7/2023.

(5) Al-Jadba, Fawzi: Op.cit, p. 37.

Authority, such as Karmzi Khoury<sup>(1)</sup>, Christians in the Gaza Strip enjoy a prestigious position, including gold and petroleum traders and their derivatives, and some of them are real estate owners. Among them are prominent doctors, engineers and academics. Among the most famous Christian families are Tarzi, Khoury, Muslim, Ayyad, Hakoura, Sayegh and others<sup>(2)</sup>.

The Christian quarter in the Zeitoun neighborhood seemed empty of Christian families, most of whom had moved to live in the upscale neighborhoods of Gaza City. Only seven families remained (Shaheen, Abu Daoud, Tarzi, Hakoura, Jishhan, Al-Amash, Al-Jilda, Masoud, and Saba)<sup>(3)</sup>. There were only 25 families left inside the Christian camp, yet the place kept its name, Christian Quarter<sup>(4)</sup>.

The decline in the number of Christians is due to the fact that large numbers of them left Gaza before and after the migration for economic reasons. After the migration, many of them went to Kuwait, the UAE, and the Gulf states in general to work. There is no doubt that the main reason for their migration was primarily the difficult financial conditions that Gaza went through after the migration, in addition to the instability and fear of the future. These reasons forced many to leave their homeland, so that the Christians of Jerusalem have decreased by a third since the occupation, and are still in continuous decline. The same thing is happening in the Gaza Strip, and this is something that cannot be limited to Christians only<sup>(5)</sup>.

Tarzi says: “(90%) of the migrants outside Gaza are citizens who arrived in Abu Dhabi and Dubai, where there is a community from Gaza estimated at about 1,000 Gazan citizens, not because of their weak economic level here; but because they preferred a quiet and stable life, and they are the owners of capital and real estate in the UAE, so about (1%) of them are originally from Gaza. As for the refugees, their financial level is weak and their lives are simple, their income is limited, and they do not have the ability to immigrate, and they depend on the churches for their livelihood and their

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(1) The number of Christians decreased from 3,500 to 1,300 in Gaza, 1/4/2014, <https://2u.pw/4Va41XP>.

(2) Interview with Abu Al-Amash, Majed, a member of the Church's Board of Trustees, 7/3/2023.

(3) Personal interview, Al-Dhani, Sherine: Professor of Sociology at Al-Azhar University, 9/3/2023 AD.

(4) Christian Quarter.. The residents left and the place remained 9/4/2015, <https://2u.pw/8DyCIfG>.

(5) Al-Sarraf, Faraj: Op.cit, p. 54.

assistance”<sup>(1)</sup> This was confirmed by Issam Farah and Atallah Tarzi.

## **Second: Christian religious institutions in the Gaza Strip:**

Christians celebrate their religious holidays by lighting the Christmas tree in Gaza City on December 22 of each year. Orthodox Christians perform their religious rituals in the Church of Saint Porphyrius on the night of January 6 of each year, while Catholics celebrate in the Latin Monastery Church on December 24 of each year, where scout groups prepare and chant prayer hymns inside the church. There are three main churches in the Gaza Strip Governorate, located in one neighborhood of the Old City, each church has its own denomination that is different from the other.

### **1- Church of Saint Porphyrius:**

The Church of Porphyrius follows the Eastern Orthodox sect, affiliated with Patriarch Theophilos III, Patriarch of the Holy City, Jordan, and Syria. It is known as the Greek Orthodox Church, known as the Greek Orthodox Church. It was established in 425 AD, at the efforts of Father Porphyrius, on an area of 216 square meters in the Zeitoun neighborhood, the oldest neighborhood in the Gaza Strip. It was built in an architectural style that embraces the ancient Katib State Mosque, with only a common wall separating them. It took five years to build, 402-407 AD, and was named the Church of Evdoxiani, after Emperor Evdokia<sup>(2)</sup>, After the death of the righteous saint, it was named after the Church of Saint Porphyrius, who was born in 347 AD in the city of Thessaloniki in Greece and died in 420 AD. He was buried in the church, which is also known as the Cemetery Church<sup>(3)</sup>.

The church underwent restoration, reconstruction and repair work, and some corridors were added to it. It was renovated in 1856 AD, where its decorations were restored, its door was expanded, and its architecture was described as the basilica, taken from the Roman basilica systems that were prevalent in the time of the early Christians, as it consisted of four main sections that were distinct from each other: the courtyard or vestibule, the church portico and the two wings, the pulpit, and the sanctuary that bears the image of Christ □ and an image of the apostles and prophets<sup>(4)</sup>, The church was renovated when the merchant George Bey visited it in 1923 AD.

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(1) Interview: Tarzi, Jamil: Former Head of the Surgery Department at Al-Shifa Hospital, and current member of the Municipal Council 8/31/2023 AD.

(2) Al-Jadba, Fawzi: Op.cit, p. 71.

(3) The Life of Saint Porphyrius, op. cit., p. 43.

(4) Ovarian Salim Arafat: Op.cit, p. 98.

He renovated what was destroyed, removed the effects of World War I, such as tiles and plaster, and restored its decorations and embellishments<sup>(1)</sup>.



**Figure (3): The inner hall of the Church of Saint Porphyrius in Gaza City**

The Church of Saint Porphyrius in Gaza City is one of the oldest Greek Orthodox churches, built in the Byzantine style.

The church has three entrances: the western entrance, the main entrance to the church, and the northern entrance, in addition to the southern entrance that leads to an upper balcony to accommodate the largest number of worshippers. The church was decorated from the inside with decorative units that represented Christian religious scenes and symbols or religious figures who had a prominent role in the history of the Christian religion. Many restoration and renovation works were carried out on the original building of the church in several stages, starting from the Crusader period, and ending in 2020 AD, and the maintenance and restoration works that took place in recent years<sup>(2)</sup>.

## **2- Latin Monastery Church (Holy Family):**

The church is affiliated with the Latin Patriarchate in Jerusalem, which is affiliated with the Catholic Church represented by Pope Francis. The Latin Monastery Church is located on Al-Kamaliya Street - named after the Ayyubid King - which extends to Omar Al-Mukhtar Street. Father Jean Mauritan arrived in Gaza and began establishing the Latin parish there. He lived in the house of an Austrian doctor in Gaza and baptized three children in Gaza. Then, Patriarch Bracco sent Father Julie to take care of the

(1) Abu Rukba, Muhammad: The Archaeological Guide to the City of Gaza, Op.cit, p. 14.

(2) Archaeological evidence, Op.cit, p. 53.



emerging parish in 1870 AD. The church was founded by the Austrian monk Father George Gat in 1879 AD, at a time when the number of Catholics did not exceed 30 individuals. It is the only Catholic church in Gaza City. Its Catholic activity began during the Balkan Wars, when a group of Catholics sought refuge in the Gaza Strip between 1876-1878 AD. Father George Gat, an Austrian national, visited the Gaza Strip in 1879 AD, then returned to his country to collect donations to build a monastery and a church. Construction began in 1882 AD on a hill at the end of Al-Kamaliya Street on an area estimated at about four dunams. This monastery consisted of fifteen rooms. In a report to the Patriarch, he mentioned that the number of Catholics had increased to about 71 individuals in 1881 AD. He recommended the necessity of building a church and a school for boys and another for girls, and purchasing a plot of land to build a shrine on it for the passage of the Holy Family in Gaza during its crossing to Egypt. This is one of the projects approved by the Patriarch. Gat bought three old houses on which the church was built, but World War I halted the construction process<sup>(1)</sup>, The father remained in the Latin Monastery until 1915 AD<sup>(2)</sup>.



**Figure (4): The inner hall of the Holy Family Church in Gaza City**

The Latin Church was built in its current form in 1956 AD by Father Hanna Al-Nimri. The church is located in the middle of the monastery grounds, and has three aisles. It serves the parishioners. Father Alphonse then completed what was missing in the church from the side structures, and decorated the church with written drawings<sup>(3)</sup>, The church grounds include

(1) Latin Parish in Gaza - Holy Family Church, <https://2u.pw/sjrpw9w>.

(2) Ovarian Salim Arafat: Op.cit, p. 283.

(3) Madabiel, Boutros: Op.cit, p. 55.

the Latin Patriarchate School, a kindergarten, a house for the nuns who serve the church, the Love and Peace Shelter, and the parish priest Gabriele Romanelli.

The church was subjected to a blatant attack by some individuals affiliated with extremist movements. The explosion occurred in the courtyard of the Latin Church, and parts of a church car were burned on February 26, 2014. Some slogans were written attacking Christians, including: “The days are between us, O worshippers of the cross, in revenge for the Muslims in the Central African Republic”<sup>(1)</sup>, It came in the context of the killings that African Muslims were subjected to, and this was met with Islamic solidarity and widespread popular condemnation, and an emphasis on the strength and solidity of Islamic and Christian relations, as there are common denominators that link the components of society in all its categories and sects. Father Hernandez refused to involve Palestinian Christians in any killing or incitement that any Christian or Muslim is subjected to on religious or moral grounds, as he stated that: “The work of the Church is related to the social aspect, and it has no other interests than spreading love and tolerance among the people of one nation with all their sects and affiliations. He stressed Islamic-Christian coexistence in Palestine, and the importance of the common denominators between the components of Palestinian society in all its categories and sects in the Gaza Strip. It is our duty to preserve the holy places together, whether Christian or Islamic, and to reject any external action that Muslims or Christians are subjected to on a sectarian basis, and to cause strife and internal conflict in Palestine between the two most important components of Palestinian society”<sup>(2)</sup>.

The Supreme Council of Sharia Judiciary, headed by Hassan Al-Jojo, and civil society institutions condemned the attacks that took place outside the customs and traditions of the Palestinian people against the Latin Monastery Church, as they are acts that only stem from a lack of ignorance to create a rift in the close relations between the two parties, and serve only the Israeli occupation, and are nothing but an act aimed at undermining the unity and coexistence between Muslims and Christians after ages and decades of agreement between them<sup>(3)</sup>.

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(1) Al-Ghoul, Asmaa: In Gaza... an attack on a church and the possibility of building another, 3/11/2014, <https://2u.pw/yV2jWOQ>.

(2) Islamic solidarity and popular condemnation of the individual attack on the "Latin Monastery" Church in Gaza <https://2u.pw/mOxBd1m>.

(3) Islamic solidarity and popular condemnation of the individual attack on the “Latin Monastery” Church. Op.cit.

### 3- Baptist Church "Protestant":

The Baptist Church: It is called the Evangelical Church, and this name means that the followers of this church follow the Bible alone, and understand it themselves, and are not subject to the understanding of others, and its understanding is not specific to one sect over another, and they are all equal and responsible before this book, and in this direction they oppose other churches that consider understanding the Bible to be limited to the men of the church who do not consider the Bible to be the sole source of the Christian religion; rather, they add to it the inspiration and unwritten teachings that the popes discuss one about the other.

Its establishment in Palestine is linked to the arrival of the English mission in 1893 AD, headed by the German priest Huber. With the assumption of power by Sultan Abdul Hamid in 1876-1909 AD, Christian institutions began their activity in various Palestinian cities by establishing schools for the Protestant sect. In light of the conditions that prevailed in Palestine due to the continuous wars, the death of many of the sons of the Palestinian people who were recruited in the military campaign, and the difficulty of the economic conditions due to the damage of agricultural seasons, at a time when students in Protestant schools in Palestine increased, and reached about 2,232 male and female students in 1886 AD, in fifty-seven Protestant schools, which confirms the rapid spread of this type of school<sup>(1)</sup>.

Previously, the Protestant church was adjacent to the Baptist Hospital, and was known as the Anglican Church. After Hooper's death, the missions were taken over by Dr. Starling, who was described as a missionary<sup>(2)</sup>. The church was actually founded in 1950 AD by the Baptist Mission, and a number of Christians from the Gaza Strip joined it. The pastor of the church is Dr. Hanna George Masoud<sup>(3)</sup>.

The Anglican Church inside the hospital dates back to 1920 AD. The church is currently closed and only opens its doors when there are Anglican delegations, as this sect does not exist in Gaza, after the emigration of the Evangelical Lavon family from the Gaza Strip to the United States of America. It is worth noting that this sect is headed in Bethlehem by Bishop Hussam Naoum, who visits the Gaza Strip from time to time<sup>(4)</sup>.

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(1) Al-Jadba, Fawzi: Op.cit, p. 71.

(2) Ovarian Salim Arafat: Op.cit, p. 286.

(3) Interview, Al-Tarzi, Atta, Op.cit.

(4) Researcher Shamali's visit, Ilham, 9/13/2023 AD.

The Baptist Church moved its headquarters with the Culture and Light Center to its new headquarters opposite the Yasser Arafat Police Station. The church contributed to providing relief services and humanitarian aid; however, according to the donations that arrive from abroad to the Palestinian Islamic and Christian community, in addition to the cultural and awareness services provided by the Culture and Light Center, the church consists of 6 floors, the first and second of which were allocated to the Culture and Light Library and holding training courses, while the sixth floor was allocated as a hall of worship.

The Baptist Church was severely damaged in the Israeli aggression on the Gaza Strip in late 2008, but it opened its doors with other churches to shelter those fleeing the Israeli bombing that targeted citizens in the 2014 aggression. The churches hosted more than 10,000 Palestinians throughout the 50 days of the aggression<sup>(1)</sup>.

After the murder of Rami Ayyad, director of the Bible Society in 2007, about 25 Christian families belonging to the Baptist Church decided to leave the Gaza Strip, including seven church leaders, headed by the church's pastor, Hanna Masoud, who left with his family to the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan, while other families immigrated to the West Bank, the United States of America, and Germany. Only five or seven people remained who belong to the Evangelical Church Council, which includes about 18 evangelical churches in Gaza, the West Bank, Jerusalem, and the territories of Palestine occupied in 1948<sup>(2)</sup>.

Women of the Christian community of all denominations use the Baptist Church courtyard and its library as a meeting place. Tuesday of each week is designated for them to discuss their situations and entertain themselves. On the social level, the church has provided financial support to some Christian families in the Gaza Strip.

#### **4- Council of Arab Orthodox Church Agents:**

The Ottoman Constitution of 1908 stipulated the freedom of religious sects to practice their religious rituals and manage their endowments, funds, and donations without interference from any official body. At the end of World War I in 1918, the Orthodox community in Gaza chose a number of its members for the task of the Church Agents Council in Gaza, such as Misbah Farah, Youssef Al-Sayegh, and Hafez Tarazi. Some members of the

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(1) Arafat, Amjad: The History of Christianity in Gaza: Embracing Islam, 12/3/2018, <https://2u.pw/G5u5IGB>.

(2) Interview, Al-Tarzi, Atta, 0p.cit.

Orthodox community had previously represented themselves in the administrative councils in Gaza and the local councils in Jerusalem, such as Suleiman Farah, Mikhail Al-Sarraf, Yaqoub Al-Madbak, and Suleiman Mansour. The council remained in place until the death of most of them in 1964. Then, the Egyptian Governor-General issued Decision No. 43/1964, and based on it, the Church Agents Council for the Orthodox community was formed, consisting of ten people, including Hafez Tarazi, Daoud Al-Sayegh, Fouad Shahbir, and others. These councils are appointed by the head of state. With the blessing of the Orthodox Patriarch of Jerusalem, there are 13 of them to manage the church's endowment and funds and the affairs of the church community<sup>(1)</sup>.

The Council was reconstituted in 1996, 2007, and 2017, and its members were nominated by the Palestinian Presidency in consultation with the Orthodox Patriarchate in Jerusalem, to supervise the affairs of the Church in Gaza and manage its donations and endowments, so that this does not conflict with the authorities of the Church Court<sup>(2)</sup>.

The Board of Trustees implemented several projects on the lands of the Christian Waqf in the Gaza Strip, and completed the construction project of the Arab Orthodox Center, which was opened on 9/15/2021. The Council was reconstituted on 4/15/2022 with the approval of the Patriarch of the Holy City, Theophilus III, and was approved by President Mahmoud Abbas. It included Maher Ayyad, Suhail Al-Madbak, Suhail Saba, Aspiro Al-Tawil, Hussam Farah, Imad Al-Sayegh, Marwan Tarazi, Nasr Hakoura, Majed Al-Amash, Elias Al-Jilda, Fadi Al-Dabbagh, Fayez Shaheen, and Bassam Shahiber<sup>(3)</sup>.

Bassem Naeem confirms that there is a cooperative relationship with the Council of Church Agents to solve any problem that hinders the work of the Christian community, and to strengthen the presence and community partnership with all segments of the Christian community in its various sects, and to ensure their presence in national events and occasions and others<sup>(4)</sup>.

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(1) Interview: Saba, Suhail, Op.cit.

(2) Tarzi, Issa, Chairman of the Church Council of Agents, 5/19/2021, <https://2u.pw/r1FPLVN>.

(3) Interview: Al-Jilda, Elias, Member of the Church Council of Representatives, Gaza, Palestine, 7/3/2023.

(4) Interview: Naim, Basem, Head of the Political Department of Hamas in Gaza, and Head of Relations with the Christian Community in Gaza, Gaza, Palestine, 8/14/2023.



### Third: Christian demographics in the Gaza Strip throughout history:

The population of the Gaza Strip increased during the Ottoman era from 5,596 people in 1525 AD to 11,390 in 1596 AD, of whom about 1,000 were Christians and 350 Jews, as Gaza emerged as the first commercial center in Palestine<sup>(1)</sup>, While the number of Christians at the beginning of the British Mandate reached 78,000 Christians in 1920 AD, and in 1947 AD it reached approximately 146,162 Christians<sup>(2)</sup>. In the 1922 census, the percentage of Christians was about (11%) of the population of Palestine, which numbered 70,429 people. However, their percentage declined in 1946 to about (8%) only, despite their number increasing by about 145,063 people<sup>(3)</sup>. According to the British census of 1945, the number of Christians in the Gaza Strip did not exceed 1,010 Christians<sup>(4)</sup>, While at the end of the British Mandate there were about 143,000 people, who constituted about (7%) of the population of Palestine<sup>(5)</sup>.

The 1948 Palestinian Nakba war led to the displacement of more than 750,000 Palestinians who were forcibly expelled from their homes and displaced in several camps inside and outside the country, including about 50,000 Palestinian Christians who were displaced, at a time when the Christian community in Palestine constituted (35%) of the population, and a large number of them chose to immigrate to the Americas due to kinship, and others headed to the Arabian Gulf - which was a factor of attraction for them - as a large part of the Christians are from the educated and cultured class who found opportunities for work and residence, and the suffering of displacement was renewed again after the 1967 war, as more than 166,000 Palestinians were displaced from the West Bank, and about 103,000 from the Gaza Strip<sup>(6)</sup>, Their percentage in the West Bank and Gaza Strip reached only about (6%), and their number was about 42,719 Christians, while the official number according to the Palestinian census in 1997 was about 40,055 Christians at a rate of only (1.5%), of whom in Gaza there were 1,688 people distributed throughout all of Gaza's governorates<sup>(7)</sup>, Of them,

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(1) Madabia, Peter: Op.cit, p. 16.

(2) Abu Al-Dinin, George Anton, Murad Al-Zeer: Op.cit, p. 23.

(3) Palestinian Central Bureau of Statistics, 1999. Annual Population and Establishment Census – 1997: Final Results. Ramallah – Palestine.

(4) Al-Dabbagh, Mustafa, Our Country Palestine, Part One - First Edition, Beirut 1966 AD, pp. 106-107.

(5) Ishaq, Munther, Introduction to Palestinian Theology, Dar Diyar for Publishing and Distribution, Bethlehem, Palestine 2017, p. 17.

(6) Once, Anton Grace: Op.cit, p. 64.

(7) Palestinian Central Bureau of Statistics: General Census of Population, Housing and Establishments 1997, Op.cit, pp. 153, 154.

789 (46.74%) are males, the majority of whom, 1623 (96.15%), are concentrated in the Gaza Strip, and the rest are distributed among the other four governorates in the Strip<sup>(1)</sup>.

The number of Christians in the Gaza Strip has declined, although their total number - according to the Palestinian census in 2007 - reached 42,565, at a rate of 1.2, as their number in Gaza reached about 1,375 individuals, of whom (47.23%) were males. As a result, the percentage of Christians in Gaza declined by (18.54%) in 2007, and their concentration in the governorates of the Gaza Strip increased by 98.4% compared to 1997, when the first general survey was conducted in the Palestinian territories under the supervision of the Palestinian Authority.

Rafah Governorate is devoid of Christian families. The number of Christians also declined in 2014 to 1313 individuals, with a decrease rate of about (1.3%) annually from 1997 to 2014, and then the average size of a Christian family reached 3.8 individuals<sup>(2)</sup>. However, the decline rate continued in 2017 by only (1%), bringing their number to about 46,850 Christians in the West Bank and Gaza Strip<sup>(3)(4)</sup>. Of them in Gaza, there are about 1,082 Christians, about 515 males and 567 females<sup>(5)</sup>. The internal Palestinian fighting that took place during this period cast its shadow over various aspects of Palestinian life in the Gaza Strip, and led to the existence of two existing authorities in the West Bank and the Gaza Strip. Then, a tight siege was imposed on the Gaza Strip, and its crossings were closed. Israeli attacks on the West Bank and the Gaza Strip increased repeatedly in 2008-2009, and the aggressions of 2012, 2014, 2021, and 2022, and what those attacks left behind in terms of a large number of martyrs and wounded, and the systematic destruction of homes and Islamic and Christian places of worship.

There are now about 347 Palestinian Christian families living in the Gaza Strip, with a total of 1,023 Christians, out of a total of 3,500 Christian

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(1) Palestinian Central Bureau of Statistics, Op.cit.

(2) Murad, Rami, et al.: Community Survey Report of Christians in the Gaza Strip, Young Men's Christian Association, Gaza, Palestine, 2014.

(3) Palestinian Center for Policy and Survey Research, Reasons for the Migration of Palestinian Christians and Ways to Reduce It, Survey Research Unit, June 8, 2020, p. 2.

(4) Palestinian Central Bureau of Statistics: Preliminary Results of the General Census of Population, Housing and Establishments 2017, Ramallah, 2018, p. 16.

(5) Table No. 7 Palestinian Central Bureau of Statistics: General Census of Population, Housing and Establishments 2017, Detailed Report for the Gaza Strip, Ramallah, 2019, p. 57.

families<sup>(1)</sup>, While Nisreen Anton estimated the number of Christians in Gaza at about 1,100 individuals, and the number of Latins among them at about 226 families, at about 26 families<sup>(2)</sup>, Among them are 7 individuals from only three families who are Baptists, and the rest are Orthodox, a number that Baroud also estimated<sup>(3)</sup> In 2017, optimists estimate that the number of Palestinian Christians is less than (2%) of the total population of occupied Palestine, and link this decline to the Israeli occupation and the clear apartheid system that the Palestinian people suffer from, whether from permanent restrictions, discriminatory policies, or land confiscation that increases the desire of Christians to leave.

The distribution of Christians in the Gaza Strip is primarily focused on the Gaza Governorate. After the presence of Christians in the Gaza Strip in most of the governorates of the Strip in 1997, the Rafah Governorate was devoid of any Christians according to the 2007 census, after it was inhabited by 7 Christians. Then, the Christians of the Northern Governorate and Deir al-Balah left in 2014 to Gaza City, with 347 Christian families in the Gaza Strip, with a total of 1023 individuals, at a rate of 99.77, and only one family in the Khan Yunis Governorate. This is due to the presence of the three Christian churches in Gaza City<sup>(4)</sup>, It also provides vital governmental and institutional services unlike other governorates in the Strip, such as private Christian schools, in addition to the community culture that is different from other cities in accepting the presence of others from the Christian religion, and the state of relative openness in Gaza City compared to the rest of the governorates, and describing the Christian community in the Gaza Strip as a mature community; due to the low birth rates among Christian families, and deaths as well, as the average age at first marriage for a Christian young man is 29 years, while for females it is 21 years, which are high ages compared to the median age for first marriage in the Gaza Strip among young people in general<sup>(5)</sup>.

The Christian presence in Gaza has a historical status that extends over time. It is not a transient or temporary presence in Gaza, as a geographical area. The facts and historical evidence from churches and monasteries confirm

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(1) Personal interview: Ayyad, Kamel, Greek Orthodox Church official, dated 7/12/2023 AD.

(2) Interview: Anton, Nisreen, Program Director at the Latin Monastery Church, Gaza, Palestine 8/2/2023.

(3) Israël veut faire disparaître la communauté chrétienne de Palestine Ramzy. Baroud. 31/10/2019. <https://2u.pw/T3LZQ1p>.

(4) Ayyad, Kamil: Op.cit.

(5) Survey, YMCA, op. cit.

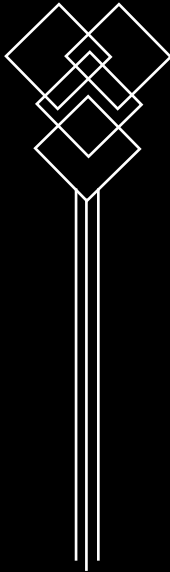




## **Palestinian Christian Community in the Gaza Strip**

that Christianity has been present in Gaza since the fourth century AD. The Christian presence in Gaza also played an important role in the Palestinian national movement throughout the stages of the history of the development of the Palestinian liberation movement, and made many sacrifices and contributed to enriching the Palestinian cultural and intellectual movement, through the national and relief role played by Christian institutions in Gaza.





## **CHAPTER Two**

# **THE POLITICAL AND NATIONAL ROLE OF THE CHRISTIAN COMMUNITY IN THE GAZA STRIP**

**The first topic: Political and struggle work before  
1948 AD**

**The second topic: The Palestinian Christian struggle  
after 1948 AD**





## Chapter Two

### The Political and National Role of the Christian Community in the Gaza Strip

**The** Palestinian Christian presence is rooted in the history of this land since the dawn of history. Palestinian Christians have not hesitated to play their role in defending their national identity and their efforts to advance the Palestinian reality in various fields, such as their active participation in local and international theological and political forums, as well as their building of educational and health institutions that serve all Palestinians, and their strengthening of the national religious sense of Palestinian Christians, so they depicted the suffering of their people as the suffering of Jesus Christ under the brutality of the Roman Empire<sup>(1)</sup>.

All Palestinians have suffered the horrors of massacres, expulsion, asylum, arrests, home demolitions, and confiscation of their lands. The occupation did not differentiate between Palestinian Muslims and Christians in its suppression operations. Palestinian history has shown that Palestinian Christians did not hide from what was happening on the official or individual level. This joint struggle was embodied - in all stages of struggle - in personalities and positions that expressed the weight of the Christian struggle role, and that it cannot be separated from the Palestinian struggle as a whole at any stage. The Palestinian Christian voice will continue to resound as long as the church bells continue to ring.

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(1) Khoury, Kamal: Palestinian Christians: An Active Role in Establishing and Developing the Contemporary Palestinian National Identity, Bethlehem Bible College, 5/8/2019, available at <https://2u.pw/o6FDWbz>

## The first topic

### Political and struggle work before 1948 AD

Palestinian writers warned early on of the Zionist plans and their dangers due to the increase in Jewish immigration and the emergence of Zionist settlement. In his book: (The Awakening of the Arab Nation from Zionism), which was published in 1905, the Palestinian Christian Najib Azoury warned of the danger of this, and called for the establishment of a Palestinian national Arab church that rejects sectarianism in all its forms. In 1911, Najib Nassar wrote his book: (Zionism), in which he stressed its danger to the future of Palestine and its people. On the pages of his newspaper Al-Karmel, he called for resisting sectarianism and colonialism. Issa Al-Issa called for the same thing in the newspaper Palestine, warning everyone of the Zionist projects fraught with European colonial penetration.<sup>(1)</sup>

The matter did not stop there; rather, the Islamic-Christian effort contributed to the formation of national associations and institutions, which played a prominent role in shaping a unified Palestinian position of Christians and Muslims regarding what the land of Palestine and its people are being exposed to.

#### **First: Formation of Islamic-Christian associations in Palestine:**

The British and Zionist dangers to Palestine increased, and World War I revealed the contradictory agreements that Britain had concluded with the Arabs on the one hand, and Britain with the Zionists on the other hand, so that Palestine and its people fell between the clutches of Zionist ambitions and British influence. This coincided with the Palestinian people's rejection of the executions carried out by Jamal Pasha against a number of Arab and Palestinian leaders during the period 1915-1916 AD, including Dr. Ali al-Nashashibi from Jerusalem, Salim al-Ahmad Abd al-Hadi, the uncle of Awni Abd al-Hadi, Hassan Hammad, and from Gaza, Arif al-Husseini, who was executed with his son Mustafa in Jerusalem<sup>(2)</sup>. At the time when Britain was playing the British national anthem in Al-Manshiya Park, which was nothing but the Zionist anthem "Hatikvah", the necessity became urgent to move and launch to gather the Palestinians to resist the Zionist threat, and Palestinian feelings increased in belief in the necessity of gathering as one

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(1) Abdul Qader Yassin: Atlas of the Palestinian Press, Palestine Liberation Organization, Research Center, 2023 AD, p. 37.

(2) Qaddoura, Jamal: Palestinian Political Parties 1929-1936 AD, Dar Maktabat Al-Hayat, Hebron, 1996 AD, p. 47.

hand to stand in the face of the inevitable Zionist threat after the Jews claimed ownership of Palestine, and the Zionist flag was raised on the hills of Jerusalem on July 14, 1918, and in Jaffa on the occasion of the issuance of the Balfour Declaration, these indicators necessitated the emergence of Islamic-Christian associations, and the frustration of any sectarian and religious propaganda carried out by the British against the Arabs. <sup>(1)</sup>

These associations were a symbol of the joint struggle against the dangers that surrounded Palestine, and the associations adopted as their symbol the “crescent sign, with the cross inside it”. The first of these associations to appear was in Jaffa in November 1918 AD, and about two weeks later the Jerusalem Association followed, and a management of twelve people was elected, half of whom were Christians in each association. These associations confronted the waves of Zionist immigration and the policy of the British Mandate government, which tried to sow the seeds of division among them, at a time when Britain tried to focus on the Christians in the East to gain their loyalty, but it failed <sup>(2)</sup>. The Islamic Christian associations condemned the Balfour Declaration, and the association in Jaffa submitted a memorandum to General Allenby in which it protested the Jewish ambitions in Palestine, and presented the demands of the Arabs, which stated: “We do not recognize that Palestine is a national homeland for the Jews, because it is our homeland, we the Arabs... We accepted them as guests, so how can we accept to be under their rule, when we have seen them to be the most tyrannical and unjust of people”.<sup>(3)</sup>

Six Islamic-Christian associations submitted a petition of protest to the military governor of Jerusalem, General Storrs, which included more than a hundred signatures on November 4, 1918. The associations present in the cities and villages of Palestine held their general conference on March 5, 1919 in Jerusalem, and elected an executive committee to supervise and direct the progress of the national movement. The conference participants established a national charter for Palestine that included the rejection of the Balfour Declaration, Jewish immigration, and the British Mandate. Then, a joint petition was submitted with the first Palestinian Arab Conference to the International Peace Conference in 1919, in which they expressed the adherence of the Arabs of Palestine to their country, and their strong rejection of the idea of a Jewish national homeland and Zionist immigration

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(1) Al-Ghouri, Emile: *The Great Conspiracy, the Assassination of Palestine, and the Eradication of the Arabs*, Dar Al-Nil for Printing, Cairo, 1955 AD, p. 56.

(2) Qadura, Jamal: *Op. cit.*, p. 49.

(3) Darura, Muhammad Izza: *The Palestinian Issue in its Various Stages, Part 1*, Modern Library Publications, Beirut, 1960, p. 36.

to Palestine, calling on the attendees to consider the desires and hopes of the people of Palestine before making any decision related to Palestine. <sup>(1)</sup>

General Kalgarski tried, through a policy of divide and rule, to strike the Muslim-Christian association defending the Arab identity of Palestine, by forming the Christian-Jewish association with the intention of dividing Muslims from Christians; but his attempt failed<sup>(2)</sup>,The statement of the Muslim Christian Society in 1919 AD stated: “We absolutely refuse to allow Palestine to be transformed into a national homeland for the Jews, and we also do not allow any Jew to immigrate to our country, and we strongly protest against the Zionist movement. As for the local Jews who used to live in Palestine, they should be considered citizens who enjoy the rights and duties that we enjoy”<sup>(3)</sup>.

The Islamic Christian Association was established in Gaza City in 1921, similar to other Islamic Christian associations in all Palestinian cities, to coordinate national and political efforts and to emphasize the unity of the Palestinian Arab people, Muslims and Christians, without discrimination, to confront British colonial plans<sup>(4)</sup>,These associations raised the slogan of national unity from the Taurus Mountains in the north to the city of Rafah in the south. The head of this association in Gaza was Shukri al-Husseini, and among its Christian members were Youssef al-Sayegh, Yaqoub al-Tawil, Hafez Tarazi, a member of the municipal council at the time, and others. The association took it upon itself to spread awareness among citizens and represent Palestine in international forums. In an interview with the members of the association with the British journalist Northcliffe, they protested before him against the Balfour Declaration and Britain’s methods in Palestine, which were clear discrimination in favor of the Jews. The association sent protests and called on the people to strike on national occasions <sup>(5)</sup>

The Gaza Society also participated in the seven Palestinian conferences held by the national movement between 1919 and 1928. One of the decisions of the first Palestinian Arab conference was as follows: “We, the Muslims and Christians, gathered as delegates of a living Arab nation..., have come here rejecting every decision taken in this regard before taking our opinion... and

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(1) Darwaza, Muhammad Izza: The op. cit, p. 36.

(2) Madabiel, Boutros: Op. cit, p. 36.

(3) Hamouda, Sanaa: The Palestinian Christian Role in Confronting the Occupation, Al-Quds International Foundation website.

(4) Al-Sarraf, Faraj: Op. cit, p. 44.

(5) Ovarian Salim Arafat: Op. cit, p. 309.

our desires and hopes, which we will present.” They were addressing the peace conference held in 1919 <sup>(1)</sup>.

In the same context, the British authorities held a missionary conference in the city of Jerusalem in 1928, attended by 2,400 people from fifty-one countries. All Palestinian Christians refused to participate in it<sup>(2)</sup>, About ten thousand Palestinians gathered in Gaza at the invitation of the Islamic Christian Society in Gaza to reject the conference in the Omari Mosque after Friday prayers on 20/4/1928 AD. They raised a protest to the British government against holding the missionary conference in Jerusalem and its support for it. The attendees decided to march in a peaceful demonstration in protest of that. As soon as the military governor of southern Palestine, Mr. Bailey, heard about that, he ordered his soldiers to shoot at them and disperse them by force, wounding three of them<sup>(3)</sup>, The scholars and dignitaries of Gaza City demanded that the British government expel the Protestant missionary, Simon al-Iraqi, from Gaza. The request was signed by Sheikh Abdullah al-Qishawi, Musa al-Surani, Youssef al-Sayegh, Hafez Shuhaibar, Hafez al-Tarazi, Khader al-Tarazi, and others <sup>(4)</sup>.

The societies rejected - in their fifth conference - the project to establish a legislative council, which was proposed to be formed by twenty-two members from the English, eight from the Muslims, two from the Christians, and two from the Jews. They drafted a national charter in which they declared the independence of Palestine within a unified Arab framework, and they swore to achieve these goals and demands, and to boycott the Jews. <sup>(5)</sup>

The Second Arab Orthodox Conference was held on November 28, 1931 in Jaffa, headed by Issa Daoud Al-Issa. The conference was attended by 85 delegates from Palestine and Jordan representing the Orthodox community. This conference defended the Arab identity of Palestine and called for no foreign country to interfere in the affairs of Palestine. <sup>(6)</sup>

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(1) Al-Kayali, Abdul-Wahhab: History of Palestine, 1979, p. 47.

(2) Madabiel, Boutros: Op. cit, p. 36.

(3) Ovarian Salim Arafat: Op. cit, p. 311.

(4) Ovarian Salim Arafat: The op. cit, p. 315.

(5) Grace, Sabri, History of Zionism 1862-1948 AD, Vol. 1, 2, Research Center, Beirut, 1977 AD, p. 30.

(6) Abu Karim, Mansour, The Experience of the Palestinian Revolution between Armed Struggle and Political and Diplomatic Struggle, Department of Labor and Planning, Gaza, Palestine 2021 AD, p. 40.



## **Second: The Christian position on the infiltration of Palestinian lands:**

The Christians of Palestine were subjected to British and Zionist attacks, as they worked together to impose a policy of divide and rule between Muslims and Christians to sow the seeds of discord between the two parties. The British Mandate also sought to transfer the properties of the Palestinian Christian churches' endowments to the Jews, by appointing two committees between 1921 and 1926 AD, to count the properties of the churches and liquidate the debts accumulated on the Orthodox Patriarchate, so that the church's ownership would be leaked to the Zionist movement, whose area was estimated at about 22,000 dunams through those two committees. In addition, 120,000 dunams of church lands and private Christian companies were seized and transferred to Zionist institutions, without even referring to the pastor of the Orthodox Church. <sup>(1)</sup>.

The British Mandate government handed over - in accordance with the land laws it enacted - about 22,000 dunams of the Holy Sepulchre Brotherhood endowments, and the total confiscations reached about 120,000 dunams of lands belonging to churches and their affiliated companies. The Patriarch played an immoral role in squandering the church's money and property, and liquidating the properties of the Orthodox Patriarchate during the period from 1921-1925 AD. In response to these dishonest actions, the Christians of the Arab churches in Palestine attacked the suspicious role of the Patriarch, and took a firm stance against anyone who was lenient in squandering Palestinian land and dealing with brokers or facilitating their tasks. A religious fatwa was issued in this regard, declaring the church an infidel to anyone involved in selling Christian lands and properties to Jews, and depriving anyone proven to be complicit from being buried in Christian cemeteries, and declaring the religion and the church innocent of him. <sup>(2)</sup>.

Christians participated in resisting the sale of lands to the Zionists, and appealed to the Christians of the world to save the holy places from the Zionist danger, as Father Elias Kanawati - the head of the Orthodox priests - prohibited the sale of lands during the Arab priests conference in February 1935 in the city of Bethlehem, and considered anyone who sells or brokers from the sons of the Orthodox Church as selling the sanctity and holiness of the birthplace of Christ and his tomb, and thus he is outside

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(1) Al-Masry, Muhammad: The struggle role of Father Manuel Muslim, and his political positions towards the Palestinian cause 1938-2022 AD, unpublished master's thesis, Islamic University, Gaza 2023 AD, p. 12.

(2) Shamali, Ilham: The Jewish National Fund and its Role in Serving the Zionist Project, Arkan for Studies and Publishing, 2022, 383.

Christianity<sup>(1)</sup>, The heads of the Christian sects in Jerusalem also issued orders to all churches to preach to Christians and warn them against selling their lands to the Zionists. <sup>(2)</sup>.

Then Elias Kanawati, head of the Orthodox Priests Conference, issued a fatwa that included the following text: “Anyone who works or brokers the sale of any part of the homeland’s lands to Jews from the sons of the church... has sold part of the sanctity and holiness of the birthplace and tomb of Christ, and is considered outside Christianity, deserving of the curse of the church, which is innocent of him... I call on every Orthodox Christian to resist the crime of brokerage, which leads its perpetrators to the fires of hell and the curse of generations, in defense of the sanctity of the country and its religious and national heritage.” <sup>(3)</sup>.

Thus, it is clear that the scholars of the nation, Muslims and Christians, realized since the thirties the seriousness of what was happening in the land of Palestine, so they hastened to issue religious fatwas to deter anyone who would dare to sell his land, regardless of the circumstances he was going through; because in that there would be a success for the Zionist project, which was lying in wait and plotting to force the farmer to sell his land and deceive him.

### **Third: Participation in the 1936 revolution:**

Christians revolted with Muslims against Jewish immigration and British politics, and Issa Al-Bandak was prominent among them. The priests warned everyone of the danger of Zionism through religious lessons given by Hanna Bahouth, Saeed Abboud, and Shadid Haddad, who called for not submitting to the Zionist danger and taking national positions, and rejecting everyone who used the Holy Book in the name of Zionism. <sup>(4)</sup>, The people of Gaza participated in the uprising of 1929 AD, and attacked the Jews who had been present in Gaza for centuries, which forced them to leave the city. <sup>(5)</sup>.

In the face of the serious events that swept Palestine from the increase in

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(1) Al-Difaa Newspaper: No. 247, 12/2/1932 AD, p. 5.

(2) Abdul Qader Yassin: The Emergence and Development of Palestinian Resistance to Zionist Settlement; Zionist Settlement Colonialism in Palestine (1882-1948 AD), Part 1, Arab League Educational, Cultural and Scientific Organization, Institute of Arab Research and Studies, 1975 AD, pp. 361, 379.

(3) Al-Hout, Statement of the Political Leaderships and Institutions in Palestine 1917-1948 AD, 3rd ed., Dar Al-Huda, Beirut, 1986 AD, Document 19, p. 742.

(4) Ayyad, Milad: Bishop Hilarion Kapogi and his role in supporting the Palestinian struggle 1922-2017 AD, unpublished MA thesis, Al-Aqsa University, 2022 AD, p. 15.

(5) Madabiel, Boutros: Op. cit, p. 35.

Jewish immigration and the theft of more Palestinian lands, the 1936 revolution erupted, and the Supreme National Committees were formed with the participation of Christians to confirm the integrative unity between the sects of the Palestinian people, and to refute any suspicion that was fabricated that the Arab Christians had different tendencies from the tendencies of the Muslims. Emile Al-Ghuri - who was one of the prominent Christians - agreed with the Mufti Haj Amin Al-Husseini and supported him in all his positions. <sup>(1)</sup>

All the Palestinian cities and villages were thrown into revolt and anger, including the city of Gaza, where its Muslim and Christian sons cooperated on 4/23/1936 to form a committee they called the National Youth Committee, announcing its goal, which was to preserve national affairs. It consisted of Rushdi al-Shawa, Jabra al-Tarzi, Muhammad Abu Ramadan, Fuad Shuhaibar, Fayez al-Wahidi, Shukri al-Saqa, Kamal al-Ghalayini, Hussein al-Shawa, Ibrahim Sakik, Sharif Barzaq, and Hilmi Abu Shaaban <sup>(2)</sup>.

Demonstrations spread throughout Gaza City and its villages, and the Palestine newspaper described the strike as “the demonstrations did not stop in Gaza for the fourth day, and in the afternoon and evening of this day, the muezzins mourned the martyrs of the strikes, and the bells of the Greek Orthodox Church rang out in mourning.” <sup>(3)</sup>

The Youth Committee in Gaza also urged adherence to the instructions of the National Committee to prevent the export and transfer of vegetables, fruits and poultry to Jews, in addition to collecting donations and sending them to cities where demonstrations intensified and were close to Jewish settlements and British army camps. The committee also sent its proposals to the Arab Higher Committee in Jerusalem, including permitting Arab immigration to Palestine as a response to preventing and resisting Jewish immigration. On the sixteenth day of the strike, massive demonstrations set out from the Greek Orthodox Church towards the Great Omari Mosque. The number of participants was estimated at about five thousand people. During these demonstrations, some of the men of Gaza gave speeches in the church courtyard urging the continuation of the revolution and strike, resistance to the British occupation and confrontation of the Zionist and settlement attack, including Rushdi al-Shawa, Father George Rishmawi, head of the Orthodox community, Sheikh Saeed al-Khatib, and Yaqoub al-Tawil. The demonstrations continued to set out daily from the Great Omari Mosque and

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(1) Eid, Milad: Op. cit, p. 15.

(2) Ovarian Salim Arafat: Op. cit, p. 326.

(3) Palestine Newspaper, Issue 4/25/1936.

the Greek Orthodox Church, the poles of the revolution and the centers of radiation. In late May 1936, two demonstrations were launched. Two violent attacks, one of which came from the Great Omari Mosque, and the other from the Greek Orthodox Church, and vice versa.<sup>(1)</sup>

During the events of the revolution in Gaza in 1936, two British soldiers were killed in the Zeitoun neighborhood, so the British imposed a curfew on the entire area, the majority of whose inhabitants were Christians. The work of the Gaza Committee focused on disrupting the railway that connected the Strip to Egypt. The Christians participated with their Muslim brothers in raising the railway tracks, and Father Samman wrote to Patriarch Barlasina to intervene to release one of the members of the Shawa family who was accused of resistance activities and sentenced to pay a fine<sup>(2)</sup>, John Jalal Abu Jord also carried out a martyrdom operation with his bus in 1936, which he was using to transport British soldiers<sup>(3)</sup>.

Issa Al-Bandak also rejected - in a memorandum on behalf of the Arab Palestinians that he submitted to Britain and the Arab delegations - considering the Christian community a minority with its own rights, and stressed that they are part of Palestinian society, rejecting the idea of dealing with them as a minority, as it is a colonial idea that aims to divide the Palestinian ranks, warning Christians against this proposal.<sup>(4)</sup>

Among the most prominent Christian names who participated in the national struggle from Gaza was Father Ibrahim Jabr Ayyad, who joined the ranks of the resistance to the policies of the mandate authorities and the Zionist movement, and participated in the Great Palestinian Revolution between 1936-1939 AD, and was then appointed as an advisor to the Palestine Liberation Organization for Vatican affairs, and followed up on the affairs of Palestinian Christian affairs with it from 1973-2005 AD.<sup>(5)</sup>

### **Fourth: Cultural contributions:**

Christians were active culturally in several fields. In the field of journalism and media, there are many examples, including the Al-Issa family, who established the daily newspaper Palestine in 1912. They are: Grace

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(1) Sakik, Ibrahim: History of Gaza, Part Four, p. 122. Al-Aref, Aref: History of Gaza, Jerusalem, 1943 AD, p. 94.

(2) Madabiel, Boutros: Op. cit, p. 35.

(3) Abu Al-Dinin, George Anton, Murad Al-Zeer: Op. cit, p. 25.

(4) Al-Masry, Muhammad: Op. cit, p. 13.

(5) Long Live the Weapon with the Cross: How Palestinian Christians Carried the Torch of Resistance, available at <https://2u.pw/Mur1XzW>.

Abdullah Al-Issa, his brother Youssef, and their cousin Issa Al-Issa. Sadiq Nassar allocated a special column in Al-Karmel newspaper, which she called the Women's Newspaper, during the period from 1926-1933, to address women's social issues and encourage them to work politically against Zionism and the British Mandate. In the literary field, Khalil Beidas emerged<sup>(1)</sup>, Among the newspapers that spread in the city of Gaza was the newspaper Sawt al-Shabab, which was issued by Fouad Kamal al-Tawil, and he named it Sawt al-Shabab in 1946. It consisted of four pages, and was issued on a semi-monthly basis. It took on the character of resistance on the first page against Britain and Zionism. The editor-in-chief and its director were arrested, and it was closed in the same year of its publication.<sup>(2)</sup>

Among the Christian intellectuals, the writer Khalil Baydas, owner of the magazine Al-Nafayes Al-Asriya, which was published in Haifa in 1908, and its issues reached Iraq, Lebanon, and Egypt<sup>(3)</sup>, Wadih Bustani and Khalil Sakakini, who devoted their pens, the pages of their books, and their educational lessons to informing everyone of the danger of Jewish immigration and the extent of the risks of the lands being leaked to the Zionist movement. Khalil Sakakini was able to establish the Nahda College in the city of Jerusalem in 1936 AD, and to work on modernizing education so that Palestinian society would be able to confront Zionism<sup>(4)</sup>.

Wadih Tarazi also contributed to editing the weekly Al-Watan Al-Arabi newspaper in 1950, which was founded by Rashad Al-Shawa<sup>(5)</sup> <sup>(6)</sup>, Daoud Bandali Al-Issa founded Al-Bilad magazine in 1951 in Jerusalem, Elias Sanbar founded the Palestine Studies magazine, Hanna Siniora founded Al-Ussu' Al-Jadeed magazine in 1978, Al-Fikr English newspaper in 1980, and Hanna Muqbil founded Al-Quds newspaper in 1974 in Beirut.<sup>(7)</sup>

In terms of Palestinian higher education and its advancement, Bethlehem University, the Catholic Christian University, was established in 1973 as the first university in the West Bank, and Birzeit University, which began as an evangelical school in 1924, and then became one of the oldest Palestinian universities, thanks to the efforts of the Palestinian Christian Nasser family

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(1) Abu Al-Dinin, George Anton, Murad Al-Zeer: Op. cit, p. 25.

(2) Al-Mobaid, Salim: Op. cit, p. 335.

(3) Shamali, Ilham: Literary Journalism in Palestine, Atlas of Palestinian Journalism, Palestine Liberation Organization, Research Center, 2023 AD, p. 105.

(4) Al-Masry, Muhammad: Op. cit, p. 10.

(5) Abdul Shafi Health and Community Association, 8/4/2018, <https://2u.pw/tmEVuld>.

(6) Abu Al-Dinin, George Anton, Murad Al-Zeer, op. cit, p. 675 .Palestinian National Council, First Session, 5/28/1964, <https://2u.pw/cgf85YU>.

(7) Abu Al-Dinin, George Anton, Murad Al-Zeer, op. cit, p. 24.



in the city of Birzeit, not to mention the pioneering role of religious institutions that provided health care to Palestinians, and provided many hospitals in Bethlehem, Jerusalem and the Gaza Strip. <sup>(1)</sup>.



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(1) Ayyad, Dima: Resistance and Living. The Role of the Palestinian Christian in the Struggle and Human Development, 12/1/2016. <https://www.islamist-movements.com/38204>.

## The second topic

### The Palestinian Christian struggle after 1948 AD

Since the Palestinian Nakba in 1948, Muslims and Christians in Palestine have lived in a special state of harmony, affection and brotherhood. They have formed a unique case of joint struggle after the occupation of the Palestinian lands and the displacement of the Palestinian people. Just as they shared in the Palestinian suffering, they shared the concern, pain and suffering.

On the political level, several Palestinian Christian figures - in both their national and religious dimensions - contributed to the national struggle. George Habash, the founder of the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine, formed the first nucleus of the Arab Nationalist Movement in Beirut in 1951. Nayef Hawatmeh founded the Democratic Front for the Liberation of Palestine. Kamal Boutros Nasser emerged in the Fatah movement, and from within Palestine, Azmi Bishara, the pioneer of modern intellectual work, and Hanan Ashrawi, who represented a model for Palestinian women on the political level, whether within the PLO or during her work representing Palestinian diplomatic culture. Most of the symbols of the Palestinian Christian resistance emerged from the Arab nationalist movement and its left wing, who called for armed resistance on the basis that what was taken by force can only be restored by force. <sup>(1)</sup>,The Palestinian Christian also excelled in presenting himself as a politician defending the Palestinian cause, such as Zahri Tarazi, the first Palestinian ambassador to the United Nations during the period between 1974-1991 AD, and Christians contributed in the educational field, such as Khalil Sakakini<sup>(2)</sup>,There are many Palestinian Christian names who played a leading role in carrying the torch of the Palestinian cause and supporting it on the local, regional and international levels.

#### **First: The role of Gaza Christians in political parties before 1967:**

When reading the history of Palestinian national action, both peaceful and armed, Christian symbols emerged who wrote lines in the Palestinian revolution through their struggle, among those who were involved in political and struggle work, and religious classification rarely appeared in it, as the reality under occupation is greater than this classification, because the target first and last is the Palestinian.

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(1) Al-Raheb, Mitri, Faith, Steadfastness, and Creative Resistance in Contemporary Palestinian Christian Thought, available at <https://2u.pw/Bcl0ELD>.

(2) Abu Al-Dinin, George Anton, Murad Al-Zeer: Op. cit, p. 25.

The communist Samira Saba, who worked in the Social Affairs Department of the Relief Agency, was able to obtain a copy of the Northwest Sinai Project for the Settlement of Palestinian Refugees. The party then photographed about five thousand copies and distributed them to the Palestinian masses and national figures. This had a significant impact in inciting and preparing the atmosphere and mobilizing the masses for a popular uprising that followed the raid of February 28, 1955, to thwart the settlement project and confront it in popular demonstrations, and to stay away from political slogans and work in the field<sup>(1)</sup> - Among them was Kamal Yaqoub Al-Tawil, one of the leaders of the national movement<sup>(2)</sup> - This exposed the communists, like others, to the arrest of their leaders and a number of their cadres and active members, as their number reached about 60 members, including Suad Hanna al-Sayegh, the Imam al-Shafi'i school, who was sentenced to six months, and Jabra, Ghazi Tarzi, Musa Saba, and Kamal al-Tawil, who were all arrested and deported to al-Wahat prison. Then the project of settling Palestinian refugees in Sinai was dropped due to the Palestinian popular harmony, responding to the call of resistance, and taking to the streets with wide popular demonstrations.

Wafaa al-Sayegh, the representative of the Baath Party, also studied the possibility of forming a national front with the Communist Party and its representative Fakhri Makki, and with the Muslim Brotherhood and its representative Moaz Abed, but their efforts faltered. The National Front was formed by the Communists, and its members included Munir al-Rayyes, Haidar Abdul Shafi, Musa Saba, and others. The Front issued a bulletin called the National Movement to distribute secret leaflets aimed at mobilizing the masses, calling for the formation of national committees, and calling for a general strike. The Front was discovered, and dozens of its members were arrested. To confront the internationalization of the sector, the name of the National Front was changed to the Popular Front as a prelude to their entering into a joint alliance<sup>(3)</sup>.

The roots of the Arab Socialist Ba'ath Party go back to 1940, while its nucleus was formed in the Gaza Strip in 1953 by a group of Palestinian students who went to study at Egyptian universities. After their return to the

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(1) Abu Amr, Ziad: *The Origins of Political Movements in the Gaza Strip 1948-1967 AD*, Dar Al-Aswar - Acre, 1987 AD, p. 46.

(2) Yaqoub al-Tawil was born in Gaza in 1924. He was one of the founders of the Al-Shaab newspaper in Jaffa. He lived between Gaza and Jaffa, then became a teacher at Gaza College, and worked in education at the Relief Agency. Abu al-Dinin, George Anton, Murad al-Zeer: *op. cit*, p. 555.

(3) Abu Amr, Ziad: *Op. cit*, pp. 47-48.



Strip, Shafiq al-Franji and Saeed al-Dajani were able to join the teaching profession and form a Ba'ath Party group consisting of Muhammad al-Hawrani, Abdullah al-Hawrani, Raja al-Sayegh, Samir Sayegh, and his brother Wafa, who were close to Michel Aflaq and Salah al-Din al-Bitar. They had close relations with historical Ba'ath leaders such as Akram al-Hawrani and Abdullah al-Rimawi.<sup>(1)</sup> And also Kamal Boutros Nasser.

Among the first students who joined the organization were: Musabah Hanafi and Saad Al-Sayegh, who were officers in the Palestine Liberation Army when it was formed. They and others formed the nucleus of the student organization affiliated with the Arab Socialist Baath Party in Gaza. The party was also able to establish a women's party organization since 1954 AD, led by Mai Al-Sayegh, after she had been a member of the Liberation League affiliated with the Communist Party<sup>(2)</sup>, With the turmoil in the relationship between the Egyptian government and the Muslim Brotherhood, the Egyptian government found in the emerging Baathist elements a new ally, as they were closer to the Egyptian regime in terms of the ideology they held compared to the communists, and the elements of the Socialist Baath Party found sympathy from the Egyptian administration, which increased their numbers and activity<sup>(3)</sup>.

The consolidation of the relationship and understanding between the Egyptian administration and the Baath leadership in the Gaza Strip led to the Baath organization in the Gaza Strip forming a link between the Abdel Nasser regime and a Baath organization led by Abdullah al-Rimawi in the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan - who was opposed to the ruling regime there - and the Baathists in the Strip smuggled weapons through Israel to the West Bank, and delivered them to Abdullah al-Rimawi's organization, where the weapons were transferred from Wafa al-Sayegh's orchard<sup>(4)</sup>, Which was given broad powers by the Egyptian administration, so that Rimawi could overthrow the Jordanian regime.

The founding members and leaders of the Baath organization in the Gaza Strip were from relatively well-off social backgrounds. Some of them were from families with large or medium agricultural properties, such as Samir al-Sayegh, Wafa al-Sayegh, Mustafa Abu Madin, and Nahed al-Rayyes. In

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(1) Interview, Yassin, Abdul Qader, Palestinian historian, telephone interview, 8/9/2023.

(2) Interview, Yassin, Abdul Qader, op. cit.

(3) Abu Amr, Ziad: Op. cit, p. 115.

(4) Wafa Tawfiq Al-Sayegh was born in Gaza in 1933. He was appointed a teacher and then director of the Al-Bureij Refugee School. He was one of the founders of the UNRWA Employees Union. Abu Al-Daneen, George Anton, Murad Al-Zeer: op. cit, pp. 680, 681.

distributing the responsibility for the party's leadership, the Gaza region was assigned to Wafa al-Sayegh in addition to the leadership of the entire organization. <sup>(1)</sup> The Baath Party allied with the Communists within the framework of the National Front, and Wafa al-Sayegh denied the rumors that an agreement was not reached between the two parties because of a phrase in the agreement document referring to the support of the honorable people in Israel, and the rejection of it by the pillars of the Popular Resistance Front, and he confirmed that this point was a major factor of disagreement; rather, the disagreement was about the future of Arab national rights in Palestine, and whether the Communists would struggle for those rights in the event of a Communist regime in Israel, and Wafa al-Sayegh stated that when Jamal al-Sourani did not give a convincing answer to this hypothetical question, the negotiations between the two parties faltered and ended in failure. <sup>(2)</sup>

In the sixties, the organization issued a party newsletter called "Al-Wahda," which was edited by a team consisting of Wafa Al-Sayegh, Jamal Al-Rayes, and Majed Al-Alami. Before that, there was Al-Mustaqbal newspaper in the fifties, which was supervised by Wafa Al-Sayegh and Muhammad Jalal Enaya.

The close relationship between the Egyptian administration and the Baath leadership in the sector - especially with Wafa al-Sayegh, the leader of the organization, and his continuous contacts with the men of the Egyptian administration, headed by Kamal al-Din Rifaat, the director of the president's office for Arab affairs - raised the suspicions of many of those involved in political work. Because these people did not know the background of that relationship, they accused Wafa al-Sayegh of working for the Egyptian authorities. These were accusations from communist elements and the Brotherhood, whose relationship with the Egyptian regime was not good, such that the credibility of the Baath organization in the sector became dependent on the improvement or deterioration of relations between the mother Baath Party and Abdel Nasser's regime. <sup>(3)</sup>

Christians participated in building the Palestine Liberation Organization, including Nicola Al-Durr, who was elected Vice President of the National Council in its first session held in Jerusalem on May 28 - June 2, 1964. The Christian community in Gaza was also represented in the first National

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(1) Abu Amr, Ziad: Op. cit, p. 118.

(2) Abu Amr, Ziad: Op. cit, p. 120.

(3) Interview with Ayyash, Abdullah, a member of the Arab Front for the Liberation of Palestine, 8/23/2023.

Council<sup>(1)</sup> Among them were Wadih Al-Tarzi and his brother Shafiq Al-Tarzi, and Wafa Al-Sayegh attended with them. Wadih attended many of the organization's external meetings in his capacity as a member of the first National Council in its first session on 5/28/1964 for the Gaza Strip. He visited more than 14 African countries, and represented the PLO at the teachers' meeting in Damascus in 1966. He contributed with his brother Shafiq Al-Tarzi, and each of Haidar Abdul Shafi, Faraj Al-Sarraf and others in establishing the Abdul Shafi Health and Community Association in 1969.<sup>(2)</sup>

### **Second: The struggle role of the Christians of Gaza after 1967:**

After the Israeli occupation of the West Bank and the Gaza Strip in 1967, several religious figures opposed the Christian Zionist thought - known as the Evangelical Zionist movement - which saw the occupation of the West Bank as a victory from Allah, and the establishment of the State of Israel in 1948 as the fulfillment of the prophecies of the Bible<sup>(3)</sup>. This was rejected by Palestinian Christians, who considered it to be outside the Christian religion, in a document issued by a group of Arab theologians in Beirut, including Father George Khodr, Albert Lahham, Father Samir Qafati, and others. The International Union of Christian Students issued the Document of Justice and Peace in the Middle East, which is the first theological document to recognize the Palestine Liberation Organization.<sup>(4)</sup> Palestinian Christians assert that the Zionist theology of Christianity lacks justice and mercy, and makes Allah - the Almighty - "racist", distinguishing between peoples on an ethnic basis. Allah does not differentiate in His love between one person and another or one people and another. Allah loves everyone with the same love. Therefore, they reject Christian Zionism. This stems not only from their national affiliation and their belief in justice and peace, but also from their belief in the centrality of Christ in the Christian faith.<sup>(5)</sup>

Although the Christian religious establishment called on priests and pastors to isolate themselves and not engage in political life, many monastic figures

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(1) Palestinian National Council, First Session, 5/28/1964, <https://2u.pw/cgf85YU>.

(2) Abu Al-Dinin, George Anton, Murad Al-Zeer: Op. cit, p. 675, and the Palestinian National Council, First Session, 5/28/1964, <https://2u.pw/cgf85YU>, Abdul Shafi Health and Community Association, Christian Encyclopedia of National Figures, Active Christians in the Twentieth Century, Baghdad Cultural Library, 1st ed., 2022, 8/4/2018 <https://2u.pw/tmEVuld>.

(3) Ishaq, Munther, op. cit, p. 193.

(4) Al-Raheb, Mitri, Faith, Steadfastness, and Creative Resistance in Contemporary Palestinian Christian Thought, available at <https://2u.pw/Bcl0ELD>.

(5) Ishaq, Munther, op. cit, p. 197.

from Palestinian and Arab Christians refused to participate and engage in the national resistance work, and rejected the practices of the Israeli occupation, whether through political or military action, such as Patriarch Michel Sabbah, the former head of the Latin Bishops of Jerusalem, who never tired of exposing the racist practices of the occupation. <sup>(1)</sup>.

A number of members of the Christian community were trained in Christian organizations such as the Popular Front, the Democratic Front, the Fatah Movement, and the Communist Party<sup>(2)</sup>. The role of Christian leadership emerged after the defeat of 1967 in establishing the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine, led by George Habash and Wadi Haddad, which adopted armed struggle. Nayef Hawatmeh split from it in 1969 and established the Democratic Front for the Liberation of Palestine<sup>(3)</sup>.

The lines become narrow when we talk about the Christian struggle in Palestine, where Palestinian, Arab, Muslim and Christian blood intertwines. Hilarion Kabugi represented a unique Palestinian-Syrian struggle case, as he worked secretly in the ranks of the Palestinian resistance, and formed the first armed cell in Jerusalem after its occupation. Immediately after joining the Palestinian Liberation Movement, Fatah, he made his priestly cloak a shield for the resistance, and thus the pastor of the diocese became a secret link between the resistance fighters inside and their leaders abroad. He described the Israeli practices as: "impudent and disrespectful of religions", and that they play a functional role in the Middle East, and Zionism is nothing but a racist, supremacist movement. The bishop was arrested in 1974 while trying to smuggle weapons from Lebanon in his car in Ras al-Naqoura, and was sentenced to 12 years in prison, of which he served four years before the Vatican intervened, so he was deported from Palestine in October 1978; but he continued his struggle until his death in 2017. <sup>(4)</sup>.

It can be said that Bishop Capucci devoted the restrictions of the Christian religious establishment and its strict teachings to the clergy, to become - like others - a model of struggle to be emulated as a religious and national leader. He felt for his Arab homeland and its central cause, and believed in its justice and humanity, and the extent of the injustice that befell the Palestinian people.

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(1) Eid, Milad: Op. cit, p. 19.

(2) Interview: Saba, Suhail, Member of the Church Council of Representatives, Gaza, Palestine 7/3/2023.

(3) Al-Masry, Muhammad: Op. cit, p. 17.

(4) George Bashir Bashir Capucci from the Syrian city of Aleppo, and the word Capucci is his nickname meaning guard. He chose the name Hilarion after a monk born in Gaza in 1922 AD. Hilarion Capucci was appointed bishop in Jerusalem, Abu Al-Dinin, George Anton, Murad Al-Zeer: op. cit, p. 666.

Elias Al-Jalda points out: “After the setback, there was broad participation by Christians in political and struggle work, and the Liberation Army forces, and a number of them joined political organizations such as the Fatah movement, and the Democratic and Popular Fronts”<sup>(1)</sup>.

Christians' participation in political and struggle work increased, and they joined the Liberation Army forces, such as Brigadier General Saad Al-Sayegh and the Fatah movement. Among them was the martyr Khader Jamal Al-Jilda - who was martyred in 1976 - as he joined the ranks of the Fatah movement while traveling to study in Lebanon, and joined the armed work in the Palestinian revolution, and was assigned the task of preparing young men and forming groups to carry out resistance operations against the occupier. In the last operation - and while preparing to assassinate the military governor in Gaza - Khader Al-Jilda was martyred in one of the orchards in the Gaza Strip. <sup>(2)</sup>.

Father Manuel Musallam, pastor of the Latin Church in Gaza, also played his national role in confronting the Israeli aggression on the Islamic and Christian holy sites in Jerusalem, and called on the Bishop of Rome and the Supreme Pontiff of the Church to demand that the occupying state stop its violations. In his letter to His Holiness Pope Benedict III, he said, “The crowds of Palestinians - Muslims and Christians - gathered in the Catholic Church of the Holy Family, send their greetings to Your Holiness, as they discuss with great pain and caution the dangerous excavations carried out by Israeli bulldozers under the foundations of the most important holy sites in Jerusalem”<sup>(3)</sup>, He described the measures taken by the occupation authorities - with the aim of establishing Jewish synagogues in Jerusalem - as putting the Christian and Muslim presence in the city of Jerusalem in grave danger, so that the Palestinian - Muslim and Christian - is left with only two options, either killing or expulsion and deportation. The Pope warned that the Israeli demographic increase in Jerusalem means a threat to the peaceful exercise of the rights enjoyed by Catholics in Palestine.

Muslim saw in the Gaza Strip the appropriate place to make the change from resistance to liberation, by conquering the impossible by transforming the thought of the man of resistance into the man of liberation, the rifle and

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(1) Interview: Elias Al-Jalda, Member of the Council of Christian Agents, Gaza, Palestine 7/3/2023.

(2) Elias Al-Jalda, Member of the Council of Christian Agents, Gaza, Palestine, 7/3/2023 AD.

(3) The pastor of the Latin Church in Gaza urges the Pope to call on Israel to stop its actions under the Al-Aqsa Mosque, 10/3/2016, available at <https://2u.pw/1FD6H5h>.

missile of resistance into the rifle and missile of liberation, and the Jerusalem of resistance into the Jerusalem of liberation. Muslim set the strategic line for that through the following points<sup>(1)</sup>:

1. The only union required is the union of the resistance and their weapons, and their independence from the factions and the authority so that the factions become political only.
2. All the resistance men in the homeland and the diaspora separate themselves, even by disobedience, from the factions, and unite under an independent leadership.
3. Israel is defeated only by the resistance, the resistance of the factions failed to protect the free people of Gilboa.
4. All of historical Palestine has become a fertile environment for this resistance, which is what neutralizes Israel's power based on aviation and the nuclear bomb.

### **Third: Participation in the struggle during the 1987 Stone Intifada:**

It is impossible to talk about the popular uprisings that erupted in Palestine without talking about the blending of Christian and Muslim struggle in confronting the occupation. In the first Intifada of the Stones in 1987, many Palestinian Christian figures participated in resisting the Israeli occupier in the West Bank and the Gaza Strip in particular, and presented a model of giving and sacrifice. This was clearly evident in the material and moral support for the fighters and strugglers, as they considered this a national and nationalist duty, so that peaceful coexistence in Palestine between Muslims and Christians in Palestine would remain a living model for the whole world. The sons of the two religions would remain partners in blood and destiny, and they would have all the rights and all the national duties towards the Palestinian cause and the legitimate rights of its people to establish an independent national state.<sup>(2)</sup>

Kamel Ayyad confirms this by saying: “Christians and Muslims are partners in the struggle. They are one people, their enemy is one, and their destiny is one.” He mentions that Kamel Ayyad was arrested in 1989 because of his participation in the first intifada<sup>(3)</sup>, **ومن** The martyrs who rose in the uprising:

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(1) Abu Rukba, Muhammad: *Manuel Muslim... A Word to the Nation*, the Encyclopedia of Knowledge and Struggle, Bayt Al-Hikma Institute, August 2022, p. 50.

(2) Abu Al-Hajj Thabet: *Op. cit.*, p. 54.

(3) Interview: Ayyad, Kamel: Public Relations Manager at St. Porphyrius Church, Gaza, Palestine, 7/12/2023.

the young man Khader Al-Tarazi - the first Christian martyr in the Intifada of the Stones - who was arrested in 1988 and tied to the front of a military jeep after being beaten. The doctor treating him in prison refused to treat him on the pretext that he was in his last breath, so he was transferred to Sorka Hospital, which refused to accept him, so he was transferred to Ashkelon Hospital in Majdal. He was martyred on the way and his organs were stolen at Abu Kabir Medical Institute<sup>(1)</sup>, And also Nasri Al-Sayegh<sup>(2)</sup>, Among the prisoners are also Elias Al-Jilda, who confirmed that he was arrested in 1989 due to his participation in the Stone Intifada, Michael Ayyad in 1990, Stiri Awad in 1990, and Majed Tarazi in 1991<sup>(3)</sup>.

The occupation authorities were holding popular courts in the monastery courtyard, which caused a lot of fear for the priests and nuns. Weapons were hidden in the parish cemetery, and Father Jalil Awad sought refuge with Sheikh Ahmed Yassin - the founder of the Hamas movement - who provided him with continuous protection for the monastery and the church<sup>(4)</sup>. During the 1987 Intifada, the occupation authorities attempted to seize control of the Greek Orthodox Church and its cemetery several times under the pretext that there were two graves of Jews in the Patriarchate Cemetery, who were Greek Christians. However, the Israeli ambition, after seizing control of the cemetery, was to establish a settlement outpost in this neighborhood and to try to find a historical connection to it through the two Greek graves<sup>(5)</sup>.

Al-Sayegh also took over the leadership of the Arab Liberation Front in the first intifada in 1987. He was arrested several times and imprisoned in the Gaza Central Prison and the Negev Desert. He worked to help Palestinian students enroll in the Iraqi University.<sup>(6)</sup>

Despite the active national presence within the Palestinian factions and political parties of the Christian community, the active national participation in the field, the involvement of its members in the factions of national action and the Palestinian revolution, their literary and cultural production, and the emergence of national symbols from them; however, this has been declining since the nineties, and Yasser Darwish attributed this to the fact that “their

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(1) Abu Al-Dinin, George Anton, Murad Al-Zeer: Op. cit, p. 323.

(2) Interview: Saba, Suhail, Member of the Church Council of Representatives, Gaza, Palestine 7/3/2023.

(3) Interview: Al-Jilda, Elias, Member of the Church Council of Representatives, Gaza, Palestine, 7/3/2023.

(4) Madabiel, Boutros: Op. cit, p. 56.

(5) Interview: Ayyad, Kamel: Public Relations Manager at St. Porphyrius Church, Gaza, Palestine, 7/12/2023.

(6) Abu Al-Dinin, George Anton, Murad Al-Zeer: Op. cit, pp. 675, 681.

presence in the past was only at the individual level, and religion had no role in their affiliation, as their affiliation was under the leftist parties, and the absence of Christians now is the responsibility of the factions, and most of the responsibility lies with the Palestinian left, which defended the Christian presence, and did not set any standard for religion when belonging to political parties, as the idea of equality between everyone in political work is clear and free, as they are the ones who participated in establishing the leftist forces, such as George Habash and Nayef Hawatmeh”<sup>(1)</sup>.

With the establishment of the Palestinian Authority in 1993 under the Oslo Accords, President Yasser Arafat announced the establishment of the Department of Christian Affairs in the Ministry of Endowments and Religious Affairs, which included eight employees. On 5/24/2012, the Higher Committee for the Follow-up of Church Affairs in Palestine was established, headed by Ramzi Khoury, by a decision of President Mahmoud Abbas, as one of the institutions affiliated with the Palestine Liberation Organization to follow up on the legal, real estate and institutional affairs of churches and Christian places of worship in order to promote the principle of complete equality before the law, and to contribute effectively to addressing the phenomenon of the migration and displacement of Christians from their homeland and working to reduce it<sup>(2)</sup>.

During the time of the Palestinian Authority, Christians in Gaza enjoyed a great deal of religious freedom, as their celebrations were held outside the borders of the churches, and the Christmas tree was lit in the Square of the Unknown Soldier, and this was done in the official presence of Muslim and Christian figures, but this began to diminish after the division, as Christians were satisfied with practicing their religious rituals inside the churches only, and lighting the Christmas tree in the YMCA at times; however, national and political figures congratulate them on their religious occasions, and visits are exchanged between Muslim and Christian families on holidays. <sup>(3)</sup>.

During the Israeli aggression on the Gaza Strip in 2008-2009, Christine Al-Turk, 15 years old, the martyr Jarish Al-Amash, 50 years old, and the martyr resistance fighter Hanna Saba, who was targeted by a missile while confronting the Israeli occupation, were martyred<sup>(4)</sup>.

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(1) Interview: Darwish, Yousry, Head of the Union of Cultural Centers in Gaza, and Member of the Palestinian National Council, Gaza, Palestine, 7/4/2023.

(2) Palestine Liberation Organization, September 23, 2023, <https://2u.pw/Ph17AIe>.

(3) How do Gaza Christians live the holidays? How do Gaza Christians live the holidays?, 9/9/2016, <https://2u.pw/7VXk7dT>.

(4) Gazan Christians entrenched with the resistance against the occupation 2/9/2009, <https://2u.pw/fZpSBjk>.



In confirmation of the depth of Islamic-Christian relations in the Gaza Strip, the Islamic-Christian Accord Conference was held in Palestine on 27/8/2012, which stressed the importance of preserving the importance of avoiding any obstacles facing Palestinian society, both Muslim and Christian, on the political and popular levels. Father Manuel Muslim stressed this by saying: “We want a modern state based on a legal and institutional foundation, the standard of which is the principle of citizenship, regardless of religion, race, and gender, and for the authority to be on a single area from all components of the state, and to ensure protection and care, on an equal footing... We want a single civil law that protects all citizens and protects us all from slipping into sectarianism or religious fanaticism”<sup>(1)</sup>.

The survival of Palestinian Christians in Palestine - and in Gaza in particular - is a requirement of the nature of Palestine. It is a holy land and in it Christianity originated. We must not leave it to be emptied of one of its most important religions that was born there. This is a duty for Christians and Muslims... And here in Gaza, it is Hamas’ duty to preserve the Christian presence... Be loyal to Islam.”<sup>(2)</sup>.

In confirmation of the common bonds and one destiny, the Greek Orthodox Church opened its doors during the Israeli aggression on the Gaza Strip in 2014 for a long period to the residents of the Shuja'iyya neighborhood who were displaced from their homes. It received more than 700 families who lived in the church facilities, and provided them with breakfast during the month of Ramadan. The church, the cemetery, and the administrative building were not spared from the Israeli bombing during the aggression. The house of Mrs. Jalila Ayyad was also bombed on 7/27/2014 with two F-16 missiles that destroyed the house. Jalila was martyred and her son was seriously injured, and the percentage of deformities in him reached more than (80%)<sup>(3)</sup>, وكذلك. The Holy Family School opened its doors during the reign of Father Manuel Musallam and the YMCA<sup>(4)</sup>.

Israel has dealt with Palestinians (Muslims and Christians) according to a policy of divide and rule, and has repeatedly tried to treat them equally at military checkpoints, electronic gates, and in official transactions. However,

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(1) Muslim, Manuel: The Islamic-Christian Accord Conference in Palestine 2012, Palestinian Accord Authority, 2015, p. 42.

(2) Sabah, Michel: The Islamic-Christian Accord Conference, op. cit, p. 42.

(3) Midwife: Ayyad, Kamel: Public Relations Manager at St. Porphyrius Church, Gaza, Palestine, 7/12/2023 AD.

(4) Interview, Al-Amash, Majed: Good surgery at Al-Shifa Hospital, Gaza, Palestine, 7/3/2023 AD.

Father Manuel Musallam, the former pastor of the Latin Church, pointed out that Israel has never treated them as Christians. He said: “No, Israel has never treated us as Christians or Palestinians, and its missiles have never and will never distinguish between one Palestinian and another.” Those who kill children, civilians, and innocents have never and will never have the teachings of Jesus Christ, the Prophet Muhammad, or even the teachings of the Torah. The planes bombed the church as they bombed the mosque<sup>(1)</sup>.

### **Fourth: The legal and political status of Gaza Christians in the political system:**

Between ringing bells and the call to prayer, the Umar Covenant in 15 AH outlined the legal and national status of Palestinian Christians more than 1430 years ago. It was truly the greatest of covenants, and its lines still draw the depth of the relationship between Christians and Muslims in Palestine and elsewhere.

The Palestinian Basic Law and its various legislations guarantee the principle of equality of rights and equal opportunities. Article 9 states the following: “Palestinians are equal before the law and the judiciary, without discrimination between them on the basis of race, sex, color, religion, political opinion, or disability,” based on what was stated in the Declaration of Independence “that the State of Palestine is for the Palestinians wherever they are; and they enjoy complete equality in rights and duties,” which are the civil rights enjoyed by every citizen.

The Palestinian National Authority did not discriminate between the members of Palestinian society in its various categories and sects. It did not give the Christian community anything special, and they were treated like the rest of the members of society. However, the late President Yasser Arafat, “Abu Ammar,” was concerned with the Christian presence in Gaza as part of preserving the state of national unity and the national fabric, without discriminating between members of society<sup>(2)</sup>. The Palestinian Authority also provided a wide space for the Christian community to work and integrate into the public space at the political, economic and cultural levels. As a result, many members of the Christian community integrated into work in the various institutions of the Authority, and held prestigious positions in their jobs, such as Ramzi Khoury and many others.

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(1) Mara, Anton Grace: The Role of Civil Society Institutions in Promoting Christian-Muslim Coexistence in Society, Bethlehem, Al-Quds University, unpublished MA thesis, 2010, p. 119.

(2) Interview, Al-Tarzi, Atta, op. cit.

The Palestinian Authority, under President Mahmoud Abbas, continued to support the Christian community and its institutions through a set of laws and policies. In line with the exemption of Islamic endowments from taxes and fees, President Mahmoud Abbas issued Decree Law No. 9 of 2014 on 2/11/2014, which included exempting recognized Christian sects from taxes and fees, based on Presidential Decree No. 227 of 2008, regarding the official recognition of churches accredited by the State of Palestine. It included the following<sup>(1)</sup>:

- 1.The properties of Christian sects registered in the name of Christian sect councils, their heads or agents, in addition to their positions and church endowments, including (churches, monasteries, schools, hospitals, religious institutes, and orphanages that are funded from the sect's budget).
- 2.Exempting the transactions and lawsuits of Christian sects from taxes and fees of all kinds.
- 3.The law applies to taxes and fees due on transactions and lawsuits, and unpaid sect properties.

This law facilitated the work of Christian institutions in the Gaza Strip, according to Sami Tarazi, the project file officer at the Papal Mission. “This law and its implementation were among the important legislative laws that facilitated the work of Christian institutions operating in the Gaza Strip, by reducing the budget for fees and taxes and allocating them to other projects”<sup>(2)</sup>, This was confirmed by Jamil Tarazi, a member of the Gaza Municipal Council, which exempted Christian endowments and their affiliates in Gaza from taxes and fees, similar to the West Bank<sup>(3)</sup>.

Suhail Saba says: “The laws of the Legislative Council worked to take into account citizenship, non-discrimination, and respect for pluralism, and this is what distinguished the period of the Palestinian Authority, and it was completed by the law exempting churches and Christian endowments like Islamic endowments”<sup>(4)</sup>.

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(1) Birzeit University Institute of Law: Decision by Law No. (9) of 2014 regarding exempting recognized Christian sects from taxes and fees <https://2u.pw/wBhe5Yq>.

(2) Interview: Tarzi, Sami, Coordinator of the Papal Mission Projects in Gaza, Gaza, Palestine, 7/11/2023.

(3) Interview: Tarzi, Jamil: Former Head of the Surgery Department at Al-Shifa Hospital, and current member of the Municipal Council 8/31/2023 AD.

(4) Interview: Al-Jilda, Elias, a member of the Church's Board of Directors, Gaza, Palestine, 7/3/2023.

Although this law is in part a violation of the concept of citizenship, as it exempts a group from tax for religious reasons, it is considered a violation of Article 9 of the Basic Law, which stipulates non-discrimination between people on the basis of religion. Moreover, this law may cause an imbalance in the commercial system between merchants and owners, as the former is obligated to pay a property tax from which the latter is exempt, given that it is subject to Christian endowments.

### **1- Representation in local councils:**

The Municipality of Gaza City was established with its Municipal Council in 1893 AD. The first council was headed by Hajj Mustafa Muhammad Al-Alami until 1898 AD. The council consisted of two Muslim members and two Christian members. The Mufti of Muslims and the spiritual leader of Christians were considered natural members of the aforementioned council, and the same was true in the Court of First Instance. <sup>(1)</sup>

The first municipal council during the British occupation was formed in 1918, headed by Muhammad Ibrahim Abu Khadra, in addition to five members, including the Christian Ibrahim Daoud Zarifa, who was considered one of the most prominent dignitaries of the Christian community and its mayor, and also one of the church's representatives. The council continued its work until 1924, while the second municipal council included eight members during the period from 1924-1928, two of whom were Christians: Ibrahim Zarifa and Hafez Daoud Tarzi, who was one of the representatives of the Greek Orthodox Arab Church in Gaza, and one of the members of the Islamic Christian Society. <sup>(2)</sup>

The third council in 1928-1934 AD included twelve members, headed by Fahmi Abdel-Hayy Al-Husseini, who was the first elected president. Among its Christian members were: Hafez Daoud Tarazi and Fouad Bishara Farah. The fourth council in 1934-1939 AD included only one Christian member, Hafez Tarazi, according to the election count. The sixth council did not include any Christian members.

After the Israeli occupation of the Gaza Strip in 1967, more than ten thousand citizens of Gaza signed a petition in 1972 demanding that they assume the presidency of the municipal council. Rashad Al-Shawa remained

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(1) Al-Sarraf, Faraj: Op. cit, p. 44.

(2) Al-Suwair, Nasser: The Role of Gaza Municipality in Social, Political and Economic Life, Unpublished Master's Thesis, Islamic University, 2008.

in it until 1975, and Yousef Farah Mukhtar represented the Christian community in it<sup>(1)</sup>.

With the return of the Palestinian Authority, President Abu Ammar appointed Aoun Al-Shawa to head the municipality, who remained there from 1996-2001, and chose Issa Nicola Tarazi to represent the community. During Nasri's presidency of the council from 2001-2005, the Christian community in Gaza was not represented by any member. When the presidency of the council was entrusted to Dr. Majed Abu Ramadan from 2005-2008, Issa appointed Nicola Tarazi again, but they were not represented again during the presidency of Rafiq Makki from 2008-2014. Jamil Tarazi says: "There was no initiative from the government or administration in Gaza to represent Christians in the municipality of Gaza. During the period of Rafiq Makki and Nizar Hijazi, there was no representation until 2019"<sup>(2)</sup>.

Recently, Dr. Jamil Suleiman Tarazi was appointed to the Municipal Council in August 2019, after the government committee in Gaza and the Hamas movement, represented by Dr. Basem Naim, requested the Christian community to nominate a Christian figure to represent them in the current Municipal Council headed by Dr. Yahya, during a meeting called the Open House<sup>(3)</sup>, "The open house requested the appointment of figures from the neighborhood councils, technocrats, as there is no specific political color, and he was nominated by contact from Al-Sarraj who offered him that, and he assumed his duties the next day, but it is a formal and relative representation, as there is a process of attracting figures who have Palestinian and international acceptance," Tarazi said. The European countries welcomed Tarazi's appointment to the council, as he was the municipality's face in receiving delegations and opening the door to partnership and cooperation for the municipality with European municipalities and governments, to implement projects and external grants<sup>(4)</sup>, Tarzi was handed several files, the most important of which were:

- a. Administrative development of employees in Gaza Municipality, and the Dues Committee.
- b. Head of Organization and Licensing.

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(1) Rashad Shawa Cultural Center, <https://2u.pw/djuP043>.

(2) Interview: Jamil Tarzi: Op. cit.

(3) Interview: Naim, Basem, Head of the Political Department of Hamas in Gaza, and Head of Relations with the Christian Community in Gaza, Gaza, Palestine, 8/14/2023.

(4) Gaza Municipality website, current municipal council, <https://www.mogaza.org/currentCouncil.#>

- c. Municipal Projects and Development Committees.
- d. Investigations and Violations File of Employees in the Municipality.
- e. It is worth noting here that there is only one employee in Gaza Municipality today, Tawfiq Al-Amash, and the others have reached retirement age.

## 2- Representation in the Legislative Council:

The first Palestinian Legislative Council consisted of 88 members representing 16 electoral districts determined according to their population. In the first Legislative Council, 6 seats were allocated to the Christian community, and one seat to the Samaritan community in Nablus. Faraj Bishara Salim Al-Sarraf, representing the Fatah movement, won the Christian seat in the first Legislative Council in 1996, out of 12 seats allocated to the district, with approximately 7,960 votes. <sup>(1)</sup>

The Legislative Council included about 132 seats within the Christian community, and the Christians of Gaza were represented by one seat in it, when Representative Hussam Fouad Kamal Al-Tawil resigned from his position in the Refugee Affairs Department in 2006 to run in the second legislative elections; but this time he was an independent. <sup>(2)</sup>With the support of Hamas, the Popular Front, and the Democratic Front, the people of Gaza did not find it difficult to elect him, as he received 55,000 votes out of the total votes of the voters; which confirms the depth of the relationship between the two parties in political, struggle, and societal work, to become a member of the Legislative Council and the Palestinian National Council, and he was also appointed a member of the Council of Agents of the Arab Orthodox Church<sup>(3)</sup>, But with his death on 10/31/2012, Christians lost any parliamentary representation. Regarding Christians not demanding the appointment of a Christian in the Gaza Legislative Council, Tarazi says: “The approach of Bishop Alexios differs from that of Father Manuel Muslim, in that the former refuses to interfere in political affairs, and enters into the maze of disputes between the two parties in Gaza and the West Bank, and devotes most of his time to religious affairs”<sup>(4)</sup>.

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(1) Central Elections Commission, Democracy in Palestine, The 1996 Palestinian General Elections, p. 69.

(2) Hussam Al-Tawil: Born in Gaza in 1966, worked in the Refugee Affairs Department of the Palestine Liberation Organization, participated in the founding of the Canaan Cultural Institute, died in Cairo in 2012, p. 268.

(3) Elias Al-Jalda, Member and Chairman of the Council of Christian Agents, Gaza, Palestine, 7/3/2023 AD.

(4) Interview: Jamil Tarzi: Op. cit.

Here a question arises: As long as the Legislative Council in Gaza is still in place, why did the Christian seat remain vacant despite the existence of a legal and legitimate alternative? Or is it because the candidate who will be approved belongs to the competing faction, and therefore the initiative was not taken to give the vacant seat to Hani Saba, and to keep the Christian voice within the Legislative Council in Gaza?

"The Christian community received the first severe blow in the Gaza Strip with the absence of the representative character of the community with the death of Hussam al-Tawil, who was not replaced, because the elections did not take place in the absence of democracy in the legislative and municipal elections, as well as the absence of legislation and laws that guarantee their presence and preserve their existence," says Yasser Darwish<sup>(1)</sup>.

### **3- Kairos Document "The Right ":**

The Kairos Palestine Document, signed by the leaders of the churches and Christian institutions in Palestine in 2009, is a clear model of struggle for the Christian churches of all denominations, and one of the pillars of the Palestinian national struggle against the occupation. It has been described as the theology of Palestinian liberation, and among what it states is that "the military occupation of Palestine is considered a sin against Allah and against humanity." It called on all churches and Christians in the world to boycott Israel, impose economic sanctions on it, and withdraw investments from it in order to cancel the racist laws it has taken against the Palestinians<sup>(2)</sup>. Therefore, this document represented the cry of Palestinian Christians about the ongoing suffering of the Palestinian people due to the occupation, and a demand for the international community to assume its responsibility to end the injustice, racial discrimination, and crimes committed daily against this people.

The boldness and importance of this document lies in its text, which states: "The military occupation of Palestine is a sin against Allah and against humanity," as well as in its proposal that a just peace means "ending the Israeli occupation of Palestinian lands and all forms of racial discrimination and establishing a Palestinian state with Jerusalem as its capital," imposing economic sanctions on it and fighting it, similar to the churches of South

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(1) Interview: Darwish, Yousry, Head of the Union of Cultural Centers in Gaza, and Member of the Palestinian National Council, Gaza, Palestine, 7/4/2023.

(2) Eid, Milad: Op. cit, p. 21.

Africa, which previously declared that “the apartheid system is a sin against Allah and humanity”<sup>(1)</sup>.

The document called on the international community to take a serious stand against the ongoing violations and attacks faced by the Palestinian people, including displacement, suffering, and racial discrimination in violation of all international laws and humanitarian law. The document expressed the historical position of the Christian community, stating that “the theology that justifies this occupation is a distorted theology, and is very far from Christian teachings, as true Christian theology is a theology of love and solidarity with the oppressed, and a call to achieve justice and equality among peoples.” The document called for ending the Israeli occupation of Palestinian land, all forms of racial discrimination, and establishing a Palestinian state with Jerusalem as its capital.

**The following is included in the document of truth<sup>(2)</sup>:**

- a. The separation wall around Palestinian cities and villages turns them into prisons, cantons and scattered remains.
- b. Israeli settlements plunder Palestinian lands, control natural resources, especially water and agricultural lands, and deprive citizens of them.
- c. Military checkpoints are a tool of humiliation for the Palestinian people in all their categories.
- d. Limited religious freedom and freedom of access to Islamic and Christian holy sites, whether on holidays or otherwise, whether individuals or clerics.
- e. Refugees in the camps have the right to return, and they are still waiting for their return generation after generation.
- f. Demanding the release of Palestinian prisoners from Israeli prisons.
- g. Jerusalem is a symbol, and the separation wall isolates its Palestinian neighborhoods, and Israel continues to empty it of its Palestinian Christian and Muslim residents, stripping them of their identity to remain in Jerusalem, by demolishing and confiscating their homes.

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(1) Ayyad, Dima: Resistance and Living... The Role of the Palestinian Christian in the Struggle and Human Development, 12/1/2016.

(2) A Word of Faith, Hope and Love from the Heart of Palestinian Suffering, Palestinian Christian Initiative, 2009, Third Edition, March 2010, pp. 4-5.



- h. There is an Israeli disdain for international legitimacy and its decisions in light of the Arab and international community's failure, as the Israeli occupation forces violate human rights, despite international reports by local and international human rights associations and bodies.

The document did not fail to emphasize the citizenship rights of Palestinians within the occupying state, and to demand that the injustice against them be lifted as a result of the policies of racial discrimination, in a state that claims democracy and that it represents the state of every citizen, but the Palestinian in it has never felt equality, whether he is Christian or Muslim.

It also rejected all acts of abuse committed by Israel against the Palestinians, and justifying its actions with the policy of self-defense, and demanded that Israel end the occupation, spread justice and peace, and complete the process of negotiations and settlement with the Palestinians who accepted the least, as the issue with Israel is an issue of Israeli occupation that is met with legitimate Palestinian resistance to put an end to this occupation, and the attendees rejected the continuation of the catastrophe of internal conflict among the Palestinians, and the state of separation between the West Bank and the Gaza Strip due to the division.

The document reminded the world that the Palestinians, Christians and Muslims alike, are not strangers to this land, for their roots are deeply rooted and linked to the history and geography of this land, and that the Western European countries committed a great mistake against the people by displacing and displacing them, so that Europe may correct what it committed against the Jews at the expense of the Palestinians and their land, and the Christians suffer on this land, just like the Muslims, from Israeli violations and attempts to displace them from this land.

The document called for resistance to the occupation through the following text: "This responsibility falls first on the Palestinians themselves who are under occupation. Christian love calls for resistance, but love puts an end to evil by following the path of justice. Then the responsibility falls on the international community, as international legitimacy today is what governs relations between peoples"<sup>(1)</sup>, The document then called on the world's churches to stand in solidarity with the Palestinian people, and praised the positions of many churches and Christians who support the Palestinian people's right to self-determination, are keen to lift the unjust policy imposed on the Palestinian people, and call for condemning all forms of

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(1) A Word of Faith, Hope and Love from the Heart of Palestinian Suffering, Palestinian Christian Initiative, 2009, Third Edition, March 2010, pp. 12-13.

racism, both religious and ethnic, including anti-Semitism and Islamophobia.

It can be said that this Christian initiative is an unprecedented initiative on the political, struggle, religious and even historical levels. It was issued by a group of Palestinian Christian religious and non-religious institutions and figures, such as Patriarch Michel Sabbah, the former Latin Patriarch of Jerusalem, Bishop Atallah Hanna, Father Mitri Raheb and others. These figures deeply felt the unprecedented suffering that the Palestinian people are being subjected to due to the continued Israeli occupation and the state of racial discrimination that Christians and Muslims are subjected to on a daily basis, at a critical time when the Palestinian cause is being subjected to tensions on the Arab and international levels, and Israeli and American attempts to deal with the Palestinian cause as an internal Israeli affair. This document was a word of truth for Palestinian Christians, in which they appeal to the world to rectify their weak positions towards the Palestinian cause.

This document is explicit and clear, and it has launched resounding cries, not only on the political or intellectual level; rather, it is a document of faith and action that was carefully crafted in terms of the use of its terminology. It did not take a neutral position towards the occupier, as everyone is targeted by the occupation's policies. It was truly a prominent point in the Christians' vision and position on the Palestinian issue, as it is their first issue.

**Finally:** The importance of this document lies in the fact that it has been translated into more than 22 languages in the world, distributed to hundreds of churches, and found wide dissemination and solidarity from many local and international figures and institutions. There is no doubt that the spread of this document was due to the strength of the message it carries and the contents it contains, its distance from sectarian discourse, and its urging of justice and equality with a commandment of love<sup>(1)</sup>.

Despite the magnitude of the challenges suffered by the Palestinian Christian community in Palestine in general and in Gaza in particular, the great national role played by the Christian leadership in confronting the Zionist project and the British occupation cannot be overlooked - as the entire Palestinian people were mobilized in confronting the Zionist migrations and international plans to control the Palestinian territories,

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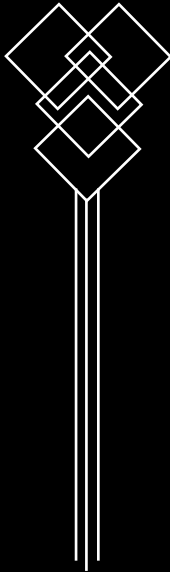
(1) Daibes, Jamal: Six Years since the Document of the Right Stand, 12/8/2015, <https://2u.pw/5exZcdO>.



## **Palestinian Christian Community in the Gaza Strip**

before the Nakba of 1948 and after it - as the Christian leadership was involved in the ranks of the Palestinian forces and factions since the outbreak of the Palestinian revolution, and led the national struggle and struggle in confronting the Israeli occupation, and presented many sacrifices, martyrs and prisoners.





## **CHAPTER THREE**

# **CHRISTIAN INSTITUTIONS OPERATING IN THE GAZA STRIP**

**The first topic: Cultural and Educational Institutions**

**The second topic: Christian service and relief associations in Gaza**





## Chapter Three

### Christian Institutions Operating in the Gaza Strip

The Christian churches in Palestine, with the support of churches abroad, played a clear role in supporting the Palestinian cause and the Palestinian people, and strengthened the Christian presence in Palestine, in light of what the Holy Bible and its interpretations dictated. The Christian institutions in the Gaza Strip achieved part of the development, and contributed to raising the awareness of struggle and revolution, fulfilling the Palestinian aspirations to combat illiteracy, poverty and unemployment, and providing permanent and temporary job opportunities for young men and women. The Christian churches showed a degree of concern and great interest in the social and economic life of the Palestinian people in the first place, so the idea of strengthening the human presence in Palestine was a foundation of the established Christian religion, considering that it is the cradle of the three heavenly religions.

These contributions were not only on the local and internal level; rather, they extended to international affairs, and their goal was to defend the Palestinian cause within the framework of the theological church institutions whose field of work has diversified to serve the Palestinian people and attempt to end their suffering from the Israeli occupation, using all the means available to them. Thus, religious institutions have played a prominent role in this regard.

## The first topic

### Cultural and Educational Institutions

The educational and cultural services provided by Christian institutions in the Gaza Strip varied, from kindergartens, schools, cultural centers, clubs, and others. Some of them were established before the Palestinian Nakba in 1948 AD, and they were pioneers in cultural and sports work before the existence of any civil society institutions.

#### **First: The Orthodox Club:**

It was founded in 1944 under the chairmanship of Iskandar Farah, and its members from the Gazan Orthodox community included Simeon Al-Sayegh, Antoine Al-Madbak, Lutfallah Saba, and Shawqi Tarazi. Its activities were not limited to sports activities; rather, they included cultural activities. In the year of its founding, it hosted many parties, and the writer Emile Habibi - the delegate of the Central Committee of the Communist Party - gave a speech in the same year in which he explained the National Charter of the National Liberation League. Its slogan was the National Union for Liberation from Colonialism and Zionism, and its goal was to establish an independent democratic state on all Palestinian soil, stop Jewish immigration, and show solidarity with the workers of the Arab countries and the world<sup>(1)</sup>. In 1992, Wafa Al-Sayegh assumed its presidency for two years<sup>(2)</sup>.

#### **Second: Young Men's Christian Association:**

The association was founded globally in Britain in 1844 AD by George Wilmes, and carried the slogan of the triangle, which means spirit, mind, body, as a community institution that does not know race, gender, or religion. The parent institution is currently located in Geneva, and is called the World Federation of Young Men's Christian Associations<sup>(3)</sup>. The history of the YWCA in Palestine is closely linked to the history of Palestine, and the churches have no sole authority over the association<sup>(4)</sup>.

This association is a branch of the World Alliance of Young Men's Christian Associations, which seeks to achieve the Christian vision of building a human society governed by justice, love, peace and reconciliation to meet

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(1) Al-Mobaid, Salim: Op. cit, p. 334.

(2) Abu Al-Dinin, George Anton, Murad Al-Zeer: Op. cit, p. 681.

(3) Interview: Farah, Hani, Secretary General of the YMCA, Gaza, Palestine 4/7/2023.

(4) YMCA History <https://2u.pw/r0VYJVW>.

the requirements of life, and to carry out national and international campaigns to mobilize financial and technical assistance to enhance the capabilities and programs of Young Men's Christian Associations in Palestine.

The association was established in the Gaza Strip as a national Christian institution through the efforts of local Christian individuals, on 11/17/1952, from a group of students who received their education in Egypt. After learning about the Young Men's Christian Association in Egypt, they transferred the idea to Gaza during the Egyptian administration with the approval of Major General Abdullah Refaat, who opened it to carry out cultural and social activities in the Sabra neighborhood. Then it moved to Al-Galaa with a 99-year lease for an area of 13 dunums that was rented from the Egyptian administration<sup>(1)</sup>.

The association raised its slogan to help refugees after the Palestinian Nakba war in 1948 AD, and was initially called the Refugee Service Department, and remained so for thirty years to serve refugees only, and then included supporting all categories of the Palestinian people, especially the youth among them to be able to change, and raise the cultural, sports, social and artistic level of its members, pioneers and partners without any discrimination, and the association is diverse in its social, sports, educational, technological and guidance activities for young men and women of the Gaza Strip to improve their reality, the association had a kindergarten that was one of the most important kindergarten schools in Gaza, and today the association has pioneering cultural activities, and has external relations with foreign institutions to provide the best services to the Palestinian public<sup>(2)</sup>.

Today, the association is a prominent national landmark and one of the most civil society institutions providing social, cultural and sports services to all sectors of the Palestinian people.

Prior to the opening of this association, the Leaders Club was established in Gaza in 1950. It aimed to build youth leadership and empower them through many programs, including conflict management, first aid, team management, and managing dialogue sessions and meetings with presentation skills, in addition to human rights. However, the program stopped working in the period between 1967-1987 due to the Israeli

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(1) Interview: Farah, Hani, Secretary General of the YMCA, Gaza, Palestine 4/7/2023.

(2) Al-Sarraf, Faraj: Op. cit, p. 56. And the message of the Young Men's Christian Association, <https://2u.pw/r0VYJVV>.



occupation of the Gaza Strip, but it resumed its activities after 1987.

The association has facilities, basketball courts, volleyball courts, tennis courts, five-a-side football courts, table tennis and chess courts, a gym for men, and a fitness hall for women<sup>(1)</sup>. The association has several sports teams for both genders and of different ages. There is a team for businessmen. For example, there is a team for those born between 2000 and 2005, a team from 2007 and 2009, another team from 2010 and 2012, and a team for girls aged 10 and 16 years.

The number of members of the association reached 2,200 members in 2023 AD, and the association by nature does not differentiate between members in terms of gender, color or religion. The board of directors consists of 12 members in this session and there is no female representation. As for the number of employees of the association, they are 9 employees, some of whom receive their salary according to the projects that the association holds<sup>(2)</sup>. The association is funded by YMCAs abroad, and some supporting institutions such as the Norwegian Youth Association, which has been a strategic partner since 2005, and the Middle East Incubation Foundation, which is a partner from Britain<sup>(3)</sup>.

The association works on a project system, and has implemented projects and programs in cooperation with the Young Women's and Young Men's Christian Association in Norway, the Papal Mission Office in Jerusalem, the Middle East Embrace Foundation in Britain, the Khatawat Foundation, the ANERA Foundation, and the Women's Cinema Screens Foundations. The Papal Mission in Jerusalem funded several projects in the Gaza Strip during the period from 2015-2020 AD, and the association is looking for other funding projects. Among the most important projects it has implemented are the solar energy project, the grassy stadium project, and the association's restoration project after the 2021 aggression due to the damage it sustained from the Israeli bombing.

The association faced a number of challenges represented in its request to the Palestinian Authority to allocate the land for the association; however, this did not happen during the era of the Palestinian Authority, which exempted it from the value of the rent until 2007 AD, then the Gaza government renewed the lease contract for a period of five years only, at a time when the President of the Authority could have issued a decision to

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(1) Interview: Farah, Hani, op. cit.

(2) Ibid.

(3) YMCA <https://2u.pw/r0VYJVW>.

allocate it to it, or even the government operating in the Gaza Strip could have allocated the land to the association without any rent. In this regard, the government in Ramallah or Gaza did not provide any contributions to the association, or enter into a partnership with it, in addition to its inability to secure the participation of sports teams in the West Bank or abroad.

Jamil Tarzi says: “The association’s problem began when the Al-Hasani family - who were previously allowed to reside on the edge of the association’s lands - began to expand and build, but they were prevented from doing so. This is where the problem arose, as the government operating in Gaza demanded that they pay \$250,000 in rent to the government, and the association refused. There is a pending case that was raised by the association’s board, and the government in Gaza is gradually trying to increase annual fees to reach a fixed rent. Dr. Basem Naim, who is responsible for the cooperation file with Christians, no longer has any weight or pressure on the administration operating in Gaza...”<sup>(1)</sup>

On the social level, the association organized evenings on the occasion of various religious holidays, and the Christmas tree lighting ceremony was transferred to its courtyard, and bazaars were held to sell holiday supplies and local industries, such as the Christmas Star Bazaar, which included Christmas collectibles and decorations, and food products such as sweets, foods and decorations, as well as the Spring Bazaar, which was held during Mother’s Day and the beginning of the holy month of Ramadan, and included products and handicrafts related to Mother’s Day, to support small development projects.

The association also holds semi-daily meetings, in addition to cultural, literary and other evenings. Various courses for civil society institutions and various Palestinian sports federations have been hosted, and the studio, which is managed by the Gaza Artists Atelier team for plastic arts, headed by Dalia Abdel Rahman, has been used to organize workshops and supervise the exhibitions that are to be held.

The association has played a pioneering cultural role in enhancing community awareness and enriching Palestinian culture. The association hosts Palestinian writers of various specializations to hold book signing ceremonies for their books and novels at the association, and invites interested parties to its four halls for a nominal fee. The association also has a library that includes 6,000 diverse books for members, managed by volunteers. In this context, Yasser Darwish says about the YMCA: “No one

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(1) Interview: Tarzi, Jamil: Op. cit.

felt that the YMCA was only for Christians. It is an incubator for all girls and boys, an incubator for cultural, intellectual and social work. It did not discriminate in its membership between anyone. It opened its doors to everyone and formed a cultural beacon, in addition to its sports role”<sup>(1)</sup>.

The YMCA has not deviated from its national role since its inception. It provided emergency aid in times of crisis with relief aid - during the Israeli attacks on the Gaza Strip - and provided urgent intervention in schools to help children relieve their psychological stress through drawing and games, without budgets from anyone with its own funding programs. In 2014, it provided shelters for the families of the association’s employees from Al-Bureij, who sought refuge in the association and resided there during the aggression.

During the period 2015-2020, the association held its projects to care for the youth and pioneers category, as these categories were the focus of the association’s strategy from 2013-2016, considering that youth are the leaders of change. It also focused on qualifying and developing the association itself to keep pace with its strategic requirements, and focused on youth and pioneers from the age of 13-20 years within the association, such as the Active Citizenship and Just Peace Project, and environmental conservation, where 250 pioneers were targeted annually, and the Creative Learning Project, which targeted 100 children from the age of 6-13 years, and established infrastructure projects such as the grassy playground, in addition to restoring some buildings and the theater.

As for training on small projects, 14 young entrepreneurs were trained on starting their own projects, feasibility study mechanisms, market studies and how to start your own project. Three youth entrepreneurial projects were loaned with the aim of empowering Palestinian youth, in addition to the distinguished summer camps that serve the age group of 5-14 years, in which 450-550 children of both sexes participate annually, for a full month that includes various sports, cultural, artistic and musical activities.

On 7/13/2010, a hand grenade was thrown inside the YMCA, but there were no injuries. This was the second attack, as the association was subjected to another bombing on 2/15/2008 in its office, where explosive devices were planted<sup>(2)</sup>, Human rights organizations condemned the storming of the association, the kidnapping of the two guards from their workplace, and

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(1) Interview: Darwish, Yousry, Head of the Union of Cultural Centers in Gaza, and Member of the Palestinian National Council, Gaza, Palestine, 7/4/2023.

(2) Throwing a hand grenade at the YMCA in Gaza, 7/14/2010 .<https://2u.pw/TNEmg5Z>.

throwing them in a remote area after tampering with the association's contents, storming the library building, detonating an explosive device inside it, and stealing a computer and a television from the administration headquarters and the association's car.

### **Third: Library of Culture and Light:**

The oldest library in the Gaza Strip, founded by the Baptist Church in 1969, after the Israeli occupation forces burned the Education Library, the only library in Gaza, located on Yarmouk Street, in 1967. The idea grew among a number of Palestinian intellectuals with a national affiliation in 1968, to establish a library with the help of the Baptist Church, which adopted the idea. The team was headed by Mrs. Anna Nicholas, director of the Ahli Hospital, wife of the priest, pastor of the Baptist Church in Gaza. Mr. George Farah and others participated in a visit to the cities of the West Bank and Jerusalem to buy and acquire what was needed for the Culture and Light Library, from the book fair in Haifa and the libraries of Nablus and Hebron, where a house was rented near the Unknown Soldier Square<sup>(1)</sup>.

The library was raided by the Israelis because it contained national and political books. The military governor of Gaza searched the books and confiscated everything related to the Palestinian cause and the history of the Palestinian people, and brought Issam Farah to trial. Some of the books were out of the sight of the soldiers and were not confiscated, as they were stored in a safe place and protected from confiscation in the event of a second raid. They were made available to readers who requested them when needed<sup>(2)</sup>.

A major fire broke out in the library in 1991, destroying many valuable books and important documents, despite its proximity to the headquarters of the military governor located in the Legislative Council; but it did not move a finger, and the fire was controlled before the flames consumed the books. As for the second fire, it broke out in 1993 and was controlled, and the library was supported again and renewed with modern and diverse books, and it was supported by politicians and members of various Palestinian organizations who demanded that the library continue working<sup>(3)</sup>.

The House of Culture provided educational and cultural services to the

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(1) Interview, Farah, Issam: Former Director of the Culture and Light Center, Gaza, Palestine, 8/8/2023.

(2) Libraries with a history - This library was established in 1972 in Gaza under difficult circumstances "Center for Culture and Light". <https://2u.pw/R3nhnFq>.

(3) Interview, Farah, Issam: op. cit.

community, and included a club for showing video recordings, and a center for teaching the English language. The House provided institutions with experts in the fields of religious education and sign language. The library adopts the reading system within it, and the House of Culture holds seminars, training, and intensive courses in the English language<sup>(1)(2)</sup>.

The library attracted many readers and researchers from male and female students who joined it with membership that gave them the right to borrow books in full. Volunteers and three Christian employees worked in it, and their salaries were funded by the Baptist Church, which collected donations to fund it. The library started with about 250 books, until its number reached 20,000 books in 2018 in various specializations. 2,000 books were issued monthly, and the number of its members reached 9,000 members. The difficult economic situation did not allow for the purchase of books, so borrowing from the library was available to researchers from the north of the Gaza Strip to the south for all academic levels<sup>(3)</sup>.

The library donated surplus books to emerging libraries in the Gaza Strip, whether to schools or to the Red Crescent Library, as well as to the YMCA Library and the Agricultural Engineers Library, which was assisted with a large number of books, arranging and classifying them according to library systems<sup>(4)</sup>.

The library faced many difficulties and pressures in financing and renting the library, until the Baptist Church embraced the library and gave it the ground and first floors, in the Baptist Church headquarters opposite the Palestinian Passport Police, where the ground floor was used as a library, while the first floor was allocated to hold courses in languages, computers and workshops for institutions wishing to do so<sup>(5)</sup>. The third and fourth floors included the headquarters of the Baptist Church, whose location in the National Hospital was closed after the Arab Evangelical Church took over the management of the hospital, and it became known as the National Hospital since 1987 AD.

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(1) Al-Khadri, Amal: Op. cit, p. 184.

(2) Ibid. 184.

(3) Interview, Al-Tarzi, Atta, op. cit.

(4) Libraries with a history - This library was established in 1972 in Gaza under difficult circumstances "Center for Culture and Light". <https://2u.pw/R3nhnFq>.

(5) Interview, Al-Tarzi, Atta, former head of the surgery department at Al-Shifa Hospital, Baptist Church official, Gaza, Palestine, 7/15/2023.

#### **Fourth: Thomas Aquinas Center <sup>(1)</sup>:**

The center was established in 2018 in the Christian camp, at the initiative of Father Mario and the Papal Mission. It specializes in training young Christian graduates on the skills that qualify them for the labor market and competition, whether in government institutions or civil society institutions. The center's courses varied between management, business, accounting, technology, languages, as well as Christian theology, which the center holds for a period of six months, funded by the Papal Mission and Catholic Relief Services, by contracting with specialized trainers. The trainee receives a certificate accredited by the Palestinian Ministry of Education<sup>(2)</sup>.

#### **Fifth: The Arab Orthodox Cultural and Social Center:**

The late President Yasser Arafat presented an area of six dunums of plot No. 479 for the benefit of the Christian family. It was registered in the name of the Committee of the Arab Orthodox Church Agents in Gaza, and was exempted from all fees. The Arab Orthodox Cultural and Social Center was established on it to serve all the Palestinian people<sup>(3)</sup>, The center is a non-profit institution of the Council of Orthodox Church Agents in Gaza, which is affiliated with the Christian Endowment. The construction of the center was funded by several institutions, such as ANERA, CHF, the Saudi Fund for Development, and the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees (UNRWA), and implemented by the United Nations Development Program (UNP)<sup>(4)</sup>.

The Cultural Center was opened in 2021 in Gaza City to activate and focus efforts, and create a leading platform for talents, innovation and entrepreneurship among young people to enhance cultural identity, and bring about social change by coordinating its activities and programs with civil society organizations and institutions inside and outside Palestine, to achieve social and cultural development for all segments of Palestinian society. The center also provided its various services to achieve its vision

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(1) Thomas Aquinas: A Christian saint born in the village of Aquino, located between Rome and Monte Cassino in 1224 AD. He received his first education at the Monastery of Saint Cassino and then at the School of Naples. He is famous for the great theological encyclopedia in which he divided his research into three sections: theology, the human, and the third about the person of Christ as both a human and a divine being. History of the Coptic Orthodox Church, available at <https://2u.pw/oMeFhpF>.

(2) Interview: Ayyad, Milad, Researcher in Modern and Contemporary History, Gaza, Palestine, 8/29/2023.

(3) Tarzi, Issa, Council of Church Agents, 9/15/2021 AD .<https://2u.pw/r1FPLVN>.

(4) Ibid.

without discrimination between young people of both sexes by emphasizing the principles of human rights law<sup>(1)</sup>, Which contribute to deepening national unity, strengthening democracy, and enabling good citizenship<sup>(2)</sup>.

The center has 24 employees, most of whom are contract workers from all parts of the Palestinian community, and are funded by the Papal Mission in Jerusalem, which also supports the Orthodox Scouts<sup>(3)</sup>, The center includes several halls for conferences, multi-purpose events, and a theater.

### Center objectives:

1. Putting an end to the cultural and civilizational isolation of the Palestinian community in Gaza, and working to highlight and develop its Palestinian identity culturally.
2. Spreading cultural awareness among segments of civil society, rejecting violence, hatred and fanaticism, and promoting the values of justice, tolerance and respect for others.
3. Conveying the Palestinian voice to the outside world, and inspiring the energies of creative Gazan youth.
4. Providing opportunities for cultural exchange and dialogue between other cultures through the center and Arab and international institutions with common goals.
5. Providing job opportunities for Palestinian youth according to the center's capabilities<sup>(4)</sup>.

The Center's philosophy is to think globally, collaborate regionally, and act locally, with the aim of shaping and demonstrating the authentic spirit of the Palestinian people, the Palestinian intangible cultural heritage and civilization, and the Palestinian national identity, alongside social transformation, technological innovation, and entrepreneurship<sup>(5)</sup>.

The center has partnered with civil society organizations such as Aisha Foundation to hold exams for beneficiaries and implement works, and has partnered with the French Cultural Center and the Union of Cultural Centers such as the Butterfly Effect Exhibition, which included cultural programs, a

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(1) Interview: Nasrawi, Michael, Deputy Director of the Orthodox Cultural Center, Gaza, Palestine, 3/7/2023.

(2) Reference Paper for the Orthodox Cultural Center, 2021.

(3) Interview: Nasrawi, Michael, op. cit.

(4) Orthodox Cultural Center Information Sheet, 2021.

(5) Orthodox Cultural Center Fact Sheet, 2021.

festival, a photo exhibition, children's drawings, theatrical performances, Palestinian folklore, and a music day<sup>(1)</sup>, Yasser Darwish points out that cultural work witnessed a qualitative shift after the establishment of the cultural center, and he emphasized the pioneering role of the Christian community, saying: "Cultural work witnessed a greater specialized shift, as it provided cultural work with exhibition halls, exhibitions, and a theater qualified to hold plays in various forms, and the Cultural Union supports and assists the center in its activities and programs with the authority in Gaza, and in obtaining work permits, which strengthened the cultural role of Christians in Gaza"<sup>(2)</sup>.

The center held a Dream and Reality exhibition for plastic arts in cooperation with the General Union of Cultural Centers, and included paintings by the Palestinian artist Tahani Skaik. The exhibition carried the Palestinian dream and hope in every corner of the exhibition, and the concerns of the homeland, and expressed the civilization and sophistication of the Palestinian people in the Gaza Strip<sup>(3)</sup>.

The Ministry of National Economy, in cooperation with private sector institutions, the Palestinian Food Industries Union, and the Cultural Center, inaugurated the annual "Our Food 2022" exhibition on the center's grounds, with the aim of introducing Palestinian consumers to Palestinian food products and increasing the marketing share of local products with the participation of 40 Palestinian companies in Gaza and the West Bank<sup>(4)</sup>.

Among the center's activities is the Orthodox Scouts, in partnership with the Palestinian Scouts, holding the first 6-kilometer scout sports marathon<sup>(5)(6)</sup>, The Arab Orthodox Scouts Group participated in holding summer and winter camps in cooperation with the Gaza Commission for Affiliated Leaders, in the center's garden and training halls for scout

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(1) Interview: Nasrawi, Michael, Deputy Director of the Orthodox Cultural Center, Gaza, Palestine, 3/7/2023.

(2) Interview: Darwish, Yousry, Head of the Union of Cultural Centers in Gaza, and Member of the Palestinian National Council, Gaza, Palestine, 7/4/2023.

(3) The General Union of Cultural Centers, in partnership with the Orthodox Cultural Center, inaugurate the "Dream and Reality" exhibition, 6/6/2023, <https://2u.pw/kLtKSoo>.

(4) Report of the Arab Orthodox Cultural and Social Center, on the Center's activities during the year 2022 AD, p. 3.

(5) Interview: Nasrawi, Michael, Deputy Director of the Orthodox Cultural Center, Gaza, Palestine, 3/7/2023.

(6) Interview: Nasrawi, Michael, op. cit.



lectures<sup>(1)</sup>,The center also held training courses for employees with the aim of developing capabilities and skills to improve job performance, gain greater administrative and life experiences, and practice work within the center's capacity building project funded by the Papal Mission in Jerusalem, with a duration of 86 training hours in time management, communications information, budget and quality, in addition to about 45 training hours in leadership skills, communication and negotiation<sup>(2)</sup>,Creative thinking and strategic planning skills.

The center also held an integrated diploma in project management under the supervision of the Ministry of Education, which was completed in 2021 AD<sup>(3)</sup>,At the start of the 2023-2024 academic year, the center announced that it would hold reinforcement lessons for the foundational stages in history, geography, and mathematics, including the seventh, eighth, and ninth preparatory stages.

### **Sixth: Educational institutions and Christian schools in the Gaza Strip:**

The Christian churches of Gaza, regardless of their sects, built schools in which Muslim and Christian students studied, relying on the Palestinian educational curriculum, and the same education based on dignity, love and equality that did not distinguish between Christians and Muslims.

The interest of Christians in developing education in Gaza dates back to an early period, specifically since 1935 AD, when Patriarch Barlassina opened a school in Gaza that was established in the Latin Monastery, which began with a kindergarten<sup>(4)</sup>,The two brothers, Shafiq and Wadih Tarazi, founded Gaza College in 1942, which influenced the educational and cultural life in Palestinian society with the influx of male and female students. At one time, it was the only private college in the Gaza Strip that granted the Matriculation Certificate<sup>(5)</sup>,It started with eight classrooms and was followed by a boarding section, and was followed by a kindergarten in a house rented from the Abu Ramadan family. At a time when government schools ended with the second secondary grade, Gaza College opened a class for the third secondary grade in 1943 AD, and thus completed the

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(1) Report of the Arab Orthodox Cultural and Social Center, on the Center's activities during the year 2022 AD, p. 1.

(2) Report of the Arab Orthodox Cultural and Social Center, op. cit, p. 1.

(3) Thomas Aquinas Center, <https://2u.pw/T4XC79b>.

(4) Madabiyal, Boutros: Op. cit, p. 35. Ashraf Saleh: Public Administration, Department of Studies, Academic Year 2023 AD.

(5) Omran, Laila: Wadih Tarazi, Supporter of Science and the Nation, and Al-Sarraf, Faraj: Op. cit, p. 57.

secondary education stage in Gaza City through the private school, and the number of its students in 1948 AD reached about 283 students<sup>(1)</sup>, The college is still open today, and Fayqa Halazoun also established the Model Kindergarten as the first kindergarten in Gaza City<sup>(2)</sup>.

There are five private Christian schools in the Gaza Strip that are attended by Muslims and Christians from the Gaza Strip. Muslim students represent the majority in all educational levels, where they study the Palestinian curriculum; but with a difference in the religious subjects, so that the Muslim student studies Islamic education, while the Christian student studies the Christian religion subject.

The Holy Family School was built in 2001, with a generous donation from Spanish benefactors. When the demand for it increased, the Rosary Sisters obtained a plot of land from the Palestinian Authority, and with the approval of President Arafat, a new school was built, known as the Rosary Sisters School<sup>(3)</sup> Which was attacked in 2007, and the Rosary Sisters Monastery in Tal al-Hawa was burned, which resulted in damage to its furniture. Hamas committed to repairing the monastery and restored the place at the time.

The Greek Orthodox School is managed by the Greek Orthodox Patriarchate Schools Committee in Jerusalem, where it was established in 1985 AD, and is supervised in Gaza by Bishop Alexios. Its classes began - inside the Greek Orthodox Monastery next to the Porphyrios Church - from the first to the fourth grade of primary school. Then the school headquarters was moved in 2000 AD to Tel al-Hawa after the late President of the Palestinian Authority, Yasser Arafat, granted it a plot of land opposite the Orthodox Center. Due to the increase in enrollment and the increase in the number of its students, the school provided its educational services for both kindergarten and basic education stages from the first to the tenth grade, according to the Palestinian curriculum<sup>(4)</sup>.

Al Manara School was established in 2004 in Al-Zeitoun neighborhood - the former location of the College of Nursing - and specializes in the primary stage from first to sixth grades. The number of its students is 256 students, none of whom are Christian students<sup>(5)</sup>, It is affiliated with the Allah Group

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(1) Skik, Part Eleven: Op. cit, p. 84.

(2) Al-Sarraf, Faraj: Op. cit, p. 57.

(3) Madabia, Peter: Op. cit, p. 59.

(4) School principal Mona Tarzi refused to provide any information about the school, its total number of students, the number of its teachers, its funding agencies, or the school's activities, in an interview on 9/13/2023.

(5) Only two students from the Christian community have joined the school since its inception.

in the United States of America, which is supervised by one of the evangelical associations, and the director of the school project is John Karlak. Shadi Jabra Al-Najjar says: “The school provides educational services for social cases in the Zeitoun neighborhood. Its fees are low and commensurate with the situation. It has health services that include a full medical examination, and provides students with a daily breakfast for three days a week. On the remaining three days, they are provided with a plate of fruit and a group lunch once a month. It also focuses on the English language and follows up with students until high school through the English Language Club”<sup>(1)</sup>.

The school was attacked on 2/24/2008, when unknown gunmen assaulted the workers, threatened them with not continuing to work at the school, and seized a bus owned by the Bible Society<sup>(2)</sup>, The Palestinian Center for Human Rights described the attack as: “part of the state of security chaos prevalent in the occupied Palestinian territories,” and it was the second attack on the school during 2008.

The five Christian schools attracted a large number of Muslim students, and witnessed a wide turnout of students seeking education in them, as their number reached about 2,685 students between kindergarten and secondary school, and 259 employees<sup>(3)</sup>, By reviewing the Palestinian Ministry of Education regarding the number of Christian students in private and public schools, the following becomes clear:

**Table (1): Number of Christian students in private schools in Gaza**

<b>M</b>	<b>School Name</b>	<b>Church to which students belong</b>	<b>Number</b>
1	<b>American International School Gaza</b>	<b>Catholic Church</b>	1
2	<b>Latin Patriarchate Gaza</b>	<b>Catholic Church</b>	27
3	<b>Holy Family Gaza</b>	<b>Orthodox Church</b>	61
4	<b>Greek Orthodox Patriarchate</b>	<b>Orthodox Church</b>	20
5	<b>Rosary Sisters</b>	<b>Rosary Order</b>	65
6	<b>Al-Manara School</b>	<b>Community of Allah</b>	0
7	<b>Total Number</b>	<b>Church to which students belong</b>	174

Many Christians agreed that their children should not be enrolled in government or UNRWA schools due to the economic status of Christian

(1) Only students from the same background will be able to attend the school year.

(2) Al Mezan Center calls for investigation into the attack on Al Manara School in Gaza, 2/24/2008, <https://2u.pw/G3k4u0o>.

(3) Mapping of Christian Organizations in Palestine,; ,Akroush ,George. Social and Economic Impact Pontifical Mission and Dar al-Kalima University,2021.p22

families, which enabled them to enroll their children in private schools, in addition to the bullying of students in UNRWA and government schools against Christian students and their religion, which was referred to by the principal of the Cairo School, who said: “They go out of the school windows, or the street, and make the sign of the cross, and the sign of the infidel”<sup>(1)</sup>.

The number of Christian students in the four Christian schools reached about 174 male and female students in the academic year 2023-2024 AD. The number of students in the Rosary Sisters School increased by about 65 male and female students out of 1114 students, while the number of students in the Holy Family School reached about 546 students, and the number of students in the Latin Monastery School reached about 289 students, and the Greek Patriarchate School included about 225 students<sup>(2)</sup>, The number of students at Al Manara School reached about 256 male and female students from the first grade to the sixth grade of primary school.

While the number of Christian students in government schools is about 17 students in the 2023-2024 academic year, although the Palestinian Ministry of Education does not classify students on religious grounds or based on identity, the number of teachers in government schools is about 12 employees as of 7/10/2023, noting that the total number of employees in the Ministry of Education since the establishment of the Authority has reached about 42 employees<sup>(3)</sup>, While UNRWA has only one employee, and there are no students in UNRWA schools<sup>(4)</sup>, In this context, Elias Al-Jalda confirmed: Regarding jobs, “There was a large percentage of managers, both male and female, in the Relief Agency who were Christians, from Rafah to Beit Hanoun, during the seventies”.

Many Christians agreed not to enroll their children in public or private schools due to the economic status of Christian families, which enabled them to enroll their children in private schools, in addition to the bullying of students in UNRWA and government schools against Christian students and their religion, which was indicated by the principal of the Cairo School: “They go out of the school windows, or the street, and make the sign of the cross, and the sign of the infidel”<sup>(5)</sup>.

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(1) The woman declined to be named in the study.

(2) Personal interview, Saleh, Ashraf, 8/23/2023.

(3) General Administration of Planning at the Ministry of Education 2023 AD.

(4) Interview: Adnan Abu Hasna, UNRWA Spokesperson, Gaza, Palestine, 7/17/2023.

(5) The woman declined to be named in the study.

**Bible Society:** Located in the center of Gaza City, opposite the Ahli Hospital, it has the Bible and specialized Christian books. It was interested in participating in book fairs held in the Gaza Strip, and offered various courses for teaching English and computers. The library includes audio and video recordings about the life of Christ in Palestine, and it has issued many publications<sup>(1)</sup>, The association was subjected to an explosive device explosion on 4/15/2007, which led to the burning of many books and the association's possessions, and the burning of all the contents of the recordings. The association closed its doors following the assassination of Rami Ayyad on 10/7/2007<sup>(2)</sup>.



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(1) Al-Khadri, Amal: Op. cit, p. 180.

(2) An association that was attacked a few months ago, 10/8/2007, <https://2u.pw/9s9yuxc>.



## The second topic

### Christian service and relief associations in Gaza

Christian institutions and associations have played a major developmental and humanitarian role in serving the Palestinian people, and their impact is clear in all sectors of the local Palestinian community. Despite the social, economic and political challenges in Palestine, more than 90% of those who benefit from these services are non-Christians, whether in the West Bank, Gaza Strip or East Jerusalem.

Christian institutions are the third largest employer after the Palestinian Authority, and the ranking of institutions in terms of employment is as follows:

1. Palestinian Authority 155,000 employees.
2. UNRWA 17,767 employees.
3. Christian institutions 9,098 employees, including 5,017 Christians and about 4,081 Muslims, and spends 416 million US dollars annually on the health, education, social services, vocational training, development and emergency aid sectors <sup>(1)</sup>.

There are 6 health care units in the Gaza Strip affiliated with Christian institutions, which benefit 169,690 people annually and employ 308 employees <sup>(2)</sup>.

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(1) Mapping of Christian Organizations in Palestine,; ,Akroush ,George. Social and Economic Impact Pontifical Mission and Dar al-Kalima University, 2021.p11.

(2) Mapping of Christian Organizations in Palestine, op. cit: p21.

### **First: Baptist National Hospital:**

The beginnings of establishing the hospital began with the arrival of the English mission to Gaza, headed by Reverend Eliot in 1891 AD, and with the deterioration of the economic and health conditions in the Gaza Strip, then he was succeeded by Dr. Bailey, who established a surgical emergency center in a house in Gaza that was rented for this purpose, which was later transformed into the Baptist Hospital. His efforts focused on providing health services after being unable to provide educational services, and they were succeeded by Dr. Sterling in 1893 AD, and the hospital provided its services to about 200,000 people, as it was the only hospital between the cities of Jaffa and Port Said, but it was closed in 1914 AD, and was exposed to theft and looting, and was damaged, so it was rebuilt in 1919 AD, and the fame of this hospital came on the tongues of the general public as "Easterly" Hospital, as it became famous for the lack of anything to compete with it in the city, in addition to the miserable living conditions, and Sterling remained in his work until 1928 AD, and his duties were taken over by Alfred, who continued his work until 1928 AD 1948 AD, and then the hospital was closed, so the Baptist Mission took it over, and its management was transferred from the Evangelicals to the Baptists, headed by Dr. Oscar Berry, and its management was from Egypt, not Palestine<sup>(1)</sup>.

The hospital's management was transferred to the American Quaker Association between 1948-1950 AD, then the Relief Agency took over the management of the hospital in 1952 AD, and then the United Palestine Association in America funded the hospital, and it was called the Arab National Hospital<sup>(2)</sup>, Today, the hospital is affiliated with the Arab Evangelical Association. Atta Al-Tarzi says: "The hospital has provided its services for more than a hundred years, and at one time it was the only non-governmental hospital, and its technical and medical level is among the highest"<sup>(3)</sup>, Over the years of the Palestinian struggle, the hospital received many of those injured in the first and second intifadas, and citizens found in it the last and permanent refuge for necessary and urgent medical services, almost free of charge at times, in various medical specialties, and the provision of paid training opportunities for graduates, and scholarships.

When the Baptist Association came from the United States in 1954 AD to take over the management of the National Hospital after the English Church

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(1) Al-Khadri, Amal: The op. cit, p. 80.

(2) Al-Khadri, Amal: The op. cit, p. 80.

(3) Interview, Al-Tarzi, Atta, op. cit.

had left it, it remained in its care for a period of fifteen years<sup>(1)</sup>. The hospital includes the American Evangelical Association School of Nursing, which taught nursing at the American university level, with a four-year study period. It is the only association that provided these services, and trained nurses, radiology and laboratory technicians. It remained in its care until 1993<sup>(2)</sup>, The nursing school graduated the most efficient nurses who worked in UNRWA clinics and government hospitals, and provided various humanitarian services to the Palestinian community<sup>(3)</sup>. After the college was closed, its headquarters were rented from UNRWA and converted into a medical care clinic to serve the Al-Zeitoun neighborhood until 2003.

A doctor at the hospital says: “The hospital is far removed from any religious or political aspect. It provides its various services to all the marginalized Palestinian public, and is supervised by doctors of various specialties, with projects funded by (C.I.O.), and funding contracts from UNRWA for medical referrals to perform operations inside the hospital, in addition to special contracts for doctors at a certain percentage with the hospital. As for the Ministry of Health, it supervises the licenses and so on, and there is no funding or government contributions to the hospital”<sup>(4)</sup>.

### **Second: Catholic Relief Society:**

Catholic Relief Services was founded in 1943 by the Catholic bishops of the United States of America to serve the survivors of World War II in Europe. Catholic Relief Services has worked in more than 130 countries, providing its diverse services to approximately 160 million marginalized citizens around the world. Its headquarters are in the United States of America, and it has offices in Jerusalem, the West Bank, and the Gaza Strip. The mission of the association is limited to fighting hunger and poverty and providing urgent humanitarian assistance in emergency situations around the world<sup>(5)</sup>.

The Relief Foundation partners with Caritas as a donor, and receives grants from the US Central Bank, and has government grants mostly from the Canadian and German governments and others. It has provided job opportunities, training, and non-food relief assistance, and has supported projects by civil society organizations, and a program to reduce and

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(1) Al-Sarraf, Faraj Bishara: Op. cit, p. 57.

(2) Al-Khadri, Amal: Op. cit, p. 83.

(3) Interview: Tarzi, Jamil: Op. cit.

(4) Interview: M., Gaza, Palestine, 9/13/2023.

(5) Interview: Abu Karsh, Hazem, Cash Transfer Project Manager, Catholic Relief Services, Gaza, Palestine, 8/15/2023.



minimize the risks to which the Palestinian people are exposed<sup>(1)</sup>. One of the most important Catholic relief programs:

### **1- Work for Money Program:**

The program is divided into two sections: the first is dedicated to the category of recent university graduates, to provide them with job opportunities for a period of four months, such as the Salalem project, and a section to establish small projects and provide financial support for them, and the project period is six months, including pioneering and existing projects such as the animal feeding project and other innovative projects, and the projects are open to all segments of Palestinian society.

### **2- Training opportunities program for university graduates and professional diploma holders:**

It was named Gaza Vision 2020, and was implemented during the COVID pandemic to support Palestinian families in Gaza to become more resilient to daily pressures and recover from crises, including the COVID pandemic. It is a project implemented in partnership with Bayader Environment and Development Association, Al Amal Rehabilitation Association, Life and Hope Association, the Palestinian Authority for Development, and the Youth Future Rescue Association, according to a paid training program that benefited 300 trainees, including those with special needs<sup>(2)</sup>.

### **3- Multi-sectoral Humanitarian Response Project for Families in Crisis:**

The project is funded by the Government of Canada and implemented in cooperation with Caritas Canada for Development and Peace in partnership with Life and Hope Association and Generations Association for Creativity and Development during the period from April 2022 to September 2023, to meet the basic humanitarian and protection needs of marginalized families living in the North Gaza Governorate, especially families headed by women through<sup>(3)</sup>:

- a. Increase access to safe, appropriate and gender-sensitive shelter and non-food items for crisis-affected households.
- b. Increase access to psychosocial support services for crisis-affected adolescents and caregivers.

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(1) Madabiel, Boutros: Op. cit, p. 66.

(2) Catholic Relief Services opens registration for financial grants, applicants' website, Gaza, Palestine, January 22, 2022, available at <https://2u.pw/0acBu2T>.

(3) Catholic Relief Services, Multi-Sector Humanitarian Response Project for Families in Crisis - Gaza, 2022, pp. 3-4.

- c. Increase equitable access to livelihood opportunities for crisis-affected Gazans, including the restoration of homes.

#### **4- Farah Family Program for Psychosocial Support:**

Catholic Relief Services diversified its provision of psychosocial support services to targeted families through the Farah Family Program, implemented through organized safe centers that bring together adolescents and caregivers in a variety of joint activities. The program provides participants with the opportunity to participate in structured sessions on a number of life skills and educational values, from building confidence, leadership, managing emotions, relationships with adults, and managing conflict, as well as protection, rights, and responsibilities. The program focused on adolescents aged 11-16 years. The project also provided recreational activities such as open days or trips, and implemented various community initiatives<sup>(1)</sup>.

Catholic Relief also provides support to Christian institutions operating in the Gaza Strip, such as Dar Al-Mahaba and Al-Iwa, and provides purchasing vouchers to poor families who are contacted through the project's links, in cooperation with the Ministry of Social Affairs, and field follow-up by researchers. Three Christian women work in the institution out of thirty employees in the Gaza Strip administration as a whole<sup>(2)</sup>.

#### **Third: The Union of Churches Association:**

It was established in 1952 as an extension of the Middle East Council of Churches to help Palestinian refugees who were displaced from their homes in 1948. It is a global Palestinian church institution that aims to train and rehabilitate the Palestinian people and provide humanitarian aid that contributes to improving their living conditions and alleviating poverty. The association was established on a plot of land rented from the Hope Institute<sup>(3)</sup>.

The association provided health and educational services, school and university loans, such as holding educational courses on computers, English language, and secretarial work, in addition to training and community rehabilitation programs<sup>(4)</sup>. Therefore, the Federation of Churches Association was considered one of the departments serving Palestinian

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(1) Catholic Relief Services, op. cit., p. 29.

(2) Interview: Abu Karsh, Hazem, Cash Transfer Project Manager, Catholic Relief Services, Gaza, Palestine, 8/15/2023.

(3) Interview: Al-Jilda, Awda, Executive Director of the Federation of Churches, and Member of the Board of Directors of the YMCA, Gaza, Palestine, 7/5/2023.

(4) Al-Khadri, Amal: Op. cit, p. 97.

refugees, and with the beginning of the seventies, it provided its services to the Palestinian people without discrimination. Thus, the Federation became an integral part of the system of civil society institutions, and an axis of the culture of the Gaza Strip, managed by the four churches, and international organizations and institutions that make up the Federation of Churches Council, with equal representation among the churches<sup>(1)</sup>, The union is managed by a central committee from several churches, and no one has a higher authority. It is a committee made up of 12 members, three from each church, without racism or discrimination. The Church Union in Gaza includes 100 employees, only 8 of whom are Christians. Their salaries are funded by the mother union, as well as by the personal efforts of the employees through the presentation of projects and financial support from the churches. However, this is not enough for the programs, so the projects are covered by Caritas France, XG Association, and other international donor institutions.

Awda Al-Jalda says: “The services of the Union of Churches Association focus on providing health centers, and offering its preventive, therapeutic and primary care services to patients in their designated areas. The treatment centers focus on maternal and child care, family planning, primary care, and health education”<sup>(2)</sup>.

The five regions of the Christian Union in the Middle East are distributed in Palestine as follows: the West Bank, Jerusalem, Nazareth, Gaza, Jordan, and Lebanon. The Union is spread across seven different locations in the Gaza Strip. The Union represents the bright face of the Gaza Strip with its presence in terms of the importance of the Christian role and presence in the Strip, stressing that it is the living witness to the nationalism, identity, and authenticity of the Union in the Gaza Strip and Palestine in general. The Union believes in the importance of collective work and partnership between civil society institutions to provide the best services. Therefore, the services provided by the Union are numerous, including:

### **1- Vocational Education and Training Program:**

The program aims to improve the economic and living conditions of poor and marginalized groups of graduates, and workers in the professional and technical sector among the youth through education and vocational training according to the needs of the labor market, as well as coordination with the

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(1) Middle East Council of Churches: <https://2u.pw/PzrNPwi>.

(2) Interview: Al-Jilda, Awda, Executive Director of the Federation of Churches, and Member of the Board of Directors of the YMCA, Gaza, Palestine, 7/5/2023.

relevant institutions to provide job opportunities within small projects and launch initiatives to employ graduates<sup>(1)</sup>, " A total of 200 students join the union annually in vocational training in various training centers, and there are work projects that support about 20-25 women in providing income, and the community development program supports schools, kindergartens, and youth groups throughout the sector<sup>(2)</sup>. The Federation of Churches has several vocational training centers, including:

### **A- Vocational Training Center in Shuja'iyya:**

The center was established in 1957 to provide training and education for young people aged 14-16 who dropped out of school and do not wish to complete their studies. They are trained in the profession of carpentry or blacksmithing, and the profession of refrigeration and air conditioning for two years, and one year for the profession of aluminum. The number of students reaches only 30-40 students, while the center accommodates between 135-145 students annually, most of whom are not proficient in reading, writing, or arithmetic operations, to help them, rehabilitate them, and enable them to read and write first according to the literacy program in cooperation with the Adult Education Center, the Palestinian Red Crescent Society, and modify their behavior second<sup>(3)</sup>.

Young people are taught industrial crafts, including their education in the prosthetic limbs factory and the employment of young men in it. The union concludes joint cooperation agreements with the Palestinian General Federation of Industries, in order to integrate students into the professional labor market, after they are absorbed in training workshops affiliated with the union, as well as psychological and social support training programs to alleviate the suffering of students and their families due to the severe siege, the closure of crossings, and the attacks that the Gaza Strip is exposed to<sup>(4)</sup>.

### **B- Vocational Training Center in Al-Qarara:**

It includes two sections for solar energy and generators. The center specializes in vocational training to obtain a diploma in general electricity and solar energy, winding transformers, motors and automatic control. The applicant must have passed the general secondary school for solar energy

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(1) Gaza Churches Union website <https://2u.pw/P33mhjK>.

(2) Interview: Al-Jilda, Awda, Executive Director of the Federation of Churches, and Member of the Board of Directors of the YMCA, Gaza, Palestine, 7/5/2023.

(3) Interview, Farah, Issam: Former Director of the Culture and Light Center, Gaza, Palestine, 8/8/2023.

(4) Gaza Churches Union website <https://2u.pw/P33mhjK>.

and generators, and their age is from 17-23 years. As for winding motors, it is required that he has a certificate of at least the tenth grade, and the trainee must not be less than sixteen years old, and not more than twenty-three years old, for a symbolic fee not exceeding ten shekels, in which the student trains for two years<sup>(1)</sup>, The number of applicants sometimes reaches about 700 applicants, from which about 30 students are selected. One of them completes his professional studies, with his tools in a bag that costs about 700 dollars. The union also helps in opening projects for a period of three months in cooperation with supporting institutions, such as the Wassim Al-Khazindar Foundation and Atallah, and they were originally professionals who studied at the union<sup>(2)</sup>.

Awda Al-Jilda adds: "In vocational education, the student pays only 400 shekels in installments, except for electricity, which he pays 600 shekels. In return, each student costs the union \$2,000 until he completes his vocational studies." The training center works in cooperation with the electricity company to accommodate a number of diploma graduates, between 10-15 graduates, to employ them within its programs. Companies and institutions also accommodate some graduates, but with a symbolic salary from the union, so that they can practice their work and be given sufficient experience.

**As for female education, it takes three forms:**

- a. The Professional Diploma Program for Secretarial Work and Office Management for Women accommodates high school graduates, and its duration is one full academic year. The program is held at the main center, and costs the association between \$1,000-1,200. A modern laptop computer is required to master the program<sup>(3)</sup>.
- b. The sewing and embroidery art program is for female students who have not passed high school for one year.
- c. Teaching wool to girls who have not completed high school, and who are 14 years old.
- d. People with special needs are also included in its programmes, and those with hearing problems are recruited from associations such as Stars of Hope, Deaf Children, and other institutions into the Union's programmes with their guarantee.

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(1) Interview, Farah, Issam: Former Director of the Culture and Light Center, Gaza, Palestine 8/8/2023.

(2) Interview: Al-Jilda, Return, op. cit.

(3) Church Union website, 9/9/2021, <https://2u.pw/YKYe6nQ>.

**2- Primary health care:**

The services of the Union of Churches came from the logic that health is a primary goal in its programs, especially for poor, remote, border and marginalized areas that are inhabited by people, but they did not receive health services, whether those provided by the Palestinian Ministry of Health or the Relief Agency for Refugees, where health care services were provided for the benefit of Palestinian women, mothers and children, from the pre- and post-natal stage through health education, and promoting the concept of caring for public and environmental health in those areas whose residents suffer from malnutrition and the spread of anemia among them, and providing a healthy child clinic, and developing family planning programs, and providing a laboratory for medical tests and medicine; and even conducting field visits to homes, in addition to dentistry, all of which are in line with psychological and social support programs<sup>(1)</sup> For those marginalized communities deprived of the most basic health services, through cooperation and joint coordination with interested and related organizations and institutions to carry out their mission in the best possible way, away from duplication of services, and focusing them in those areas<sup>(2)</sup>. Free health services are provided through three health clinics affiliated with the Union in Rafah, in Khirbet Al-Adas, Al-Shuja'iyya neighborhood, and Al-Daraj neighborhood. There is a part of the care provided for a nominal fee, starting with pre-marital examinations, pregnancy, childbirth, and the child up to the age of six years for free, then for very nominal amounts used as operating expenses<sup>(3)</sup>, The three clinics also include a psychological support department.

**3- Relief services:**

The Federation of Churches provides relief services to the Palestinian people, but not on a continuous basis. It consists of food parcels, financial amounts, psychological support programs, recreational trips, and additional services provided in three areas: Rafah, Shuja'iyya, and Daraj, but according to aid standards and special programs coordinated with the relevant government facilities that have sufficient information for poor and needy families. Psychological support or psychological relief operations are carried out through the Social Research and Psychological Support Departments, by holding psychological support sessions throughout the

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(1) Gaza Churches Union website <https://2u.pw/P33mhjK>.

(2) Middle East Council of Churches <https://2u.pw/5RHLu98>.

(3) Interview: Al-Jilda, Awda, Executive Director of the Federation of Churches, and Member of the Board of Directors of the YMCA, Gaza, Palestine, 7/5/2023.

year, as they are not related to events or aggression only. There are programs for theoretical and recreational awareness for mothers and children<sup>(1)</sup>.

The idea of training and education programs is based on contributing to improving the living conditions of young people who have dropped out of schools and other places, and enhancing the living conditions of women. A set of goals that the union seeks to achieve can be identified, which are as follows:

- a. Providing its health and educational services and emergency humanitarian aid, without discrimination based on religion, race, color, gender, or even political and organizational orientation or even geographical location, as it includes all governorates of the Gaza Strip.
- b. Limiting the Union's activity to the health, education and vocational training aspects primarily, in addition to relief work according to programs studying the social status and economic situation of the family or individual in need, either in material form, or in-kind assistance available to the Union.
- c. Providing high-quality education and training in a variety of skills and professions designed according to the requirements of society and the market.
- d. Focusing on the category of students aged 14-16 who dropped out of school, and including them in the Union's training professions in carpentry, furniture making, blacksmithing and welding over a three-year cycle.
- e. The youth category aged 17-23 are accommodated in special electrical training courses lasting two years.
- f. Enhancing the capabilities of workers in the professional field.
- g. Helping the graduates of the Union of Churches Association to obtain job opportunities, whether through the services provided by the Association or through partnership and cooperation with other institutions. H. Raising awareness among youth and vulnerable groups about the concepts and issues of civil society, and taking them by the hand to influence the decisions of policy makers to adopt the concerns of marginalized people.

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(1) Interview: Al-Jilda, Awda, op. cit.



#### **4- Improving the living conditions of needy families:**

The program aims to meet the needs of the disabled by providing the necessary medical and non-medical equipment, contributing to enabling the local community to achieve justice and advocate for its causes, and intensifying communication and coordination with local, regional and international organizations to defend the rights of the Palestinian people.

#### **5- Student loans:**

Providing university loans without interest, and is held under certain conditions in cooperation with the Bank of Palestine, provided that the applicant has high grades. As for the repayment mechanism, it begins with work after university, a bachelor's degree in various literary and scientific specializations. The student is granted \$750 each semester. Loans are also provided to students of master's and doctoral programs, and their value reaches \$1,000. The loans require three guarantors from the bank, so the matter has nothing to do with the economic situation.

The Federation of Churches Association, like other national and civil institutions, suffers from the duality of authority in the Gaza Strip between the government operating in Ramallah and the administration of business in Gaza. Previously, there was one authority to which taxes were submitted, but today there are two authorities with two taxes, and the Federation rents land from the Hope Institute, so it does not receive any aid from the two governments. However, there is no interference in matters of licensing in health clinics by imposing control over them in remote and marginalized areas, as they provide primarily humanitarian relief aid. In some areas, the local community participates in a local committee of mukhtars and sheikhs of the mosque to follow up and cooperate in informing residents of the Federation's programs and disseminating them among them. Cooperation with them continues to serve Palestinian society without racial discrimination

#### **Fourth: Caritas Gaza:**

A humanitarian development organization that provides social and pastoral services affiliated with the Catholic Church, founded in Jerusalem in 1967 to help the Palestinian people in the occupied Palestinian territories. Caritas Internationalis has a federation of more than 160 members, and operates in more than 200 countries. It is affiliated with Caritas Jerusalem, and in the Gaza Strip it has a main branch called Caritas Gaza on church property. The branch includes many specialized medical units in the five governorates of the Gaza Strip<sup>(1)</sup>.

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(1) Caritas Jerusalem website, available at <https://2u.pw/yXfJGgB>.



Its mission: to enable the people of Palestine to achieve their full aspirations to live in peace, to give a voice to the voiceless, to encourage Palestinian youth, to achieve sustainable development, to improve health services, to promote social welfare, food security and livelihoods through advocacy, to provide small and soft loans, to create opportunities for work and education, to assist charities and intervene in emergencies, to provide direct humanitarian assistance to the needy among the poor and marginalized, to empower youth to work as community leaders, and to call for peace, freedom and justice in the Holy Land<sup>(1)</sup>.

Caritas Gaza includes several primary care clinics, specialized clinics, a medical analysis laboratory and a pharmacy, through special initiatives contracting with Gaza doctors for a symbolic fee of 30 shekels for an examination and 20 shekels for a photo. The field side of Caritas' work is divided into two parts: the largest part is field work outside the clinics, targeting border areas and marginalized areas that do not have any type of social and health services; but without fixed centers for the organization, but rather through local community institutions, which is similar to mobile clinics or inside private clinics to serve the purpose<sup>(2)</sup>.

Caritas also provides social services to poor families who are not included in any aid programs, and have no income or breadwinner, whether widows or those supported by a woman. Their assistance is provided through civil society organizations (CBOs) and free services and food parcels, in cooperation with the Ministry of Social Development. If they do not meet the conditions, they do not receive any parcels. There are widows and houses supported by women.

There is a cooperative and follow-up relationship between Caritas and all the relevant ministries, such as the Ministry of Health. In parallel with the work of the Ministry of Health, there is the Double Oush Foundation, which provides nursing services, nutritional and health awareness in remote areas, so that there is no duplication of work, and so that care is taken not to duplicate the aid for poor families who receive it, which would result in depriving other families.

As for the organization's pioneers, most of them are Muslims, and there is a small group from the Christian community. The number of employees in Caritas is 80 employees, between permanent and contract employees, of whom only 20 are Christian employees, and they are funded by Caritas

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(1) Caritas Jerusalem website <https://2u.pw/yXfJGgB>.

(2) Interview: Anton, Director of Caritas Gaza, 7/6/2023.

Jerusalem. The projects are presented in the name of Gaza projects through Caritas Jerusalem, i.e. the central administration, and agreements are concluded in the name of Caritas Gaza. There are support programs from (USAD) and the Anira Foundation.

There are also relief programs that include more than one partner, including the Family to Family programs from such funding. Some of these programs are provided to Christians, and they are treated like the rest of the members of society. They are included in the programs according to classification, and there is no distinction between Muslims and Christians in providing aid.

The Foundation provides assistance programs for voluntary returnees from Europe to help them with operational programs, preparing projects, and purchasing a car. There is also a food security and shelter support project that was implemented in 2022, in cooperation with Caritas Poland within the framework of Polish development cooperation of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Poland<sup>(1)</sup>, The organization is constantly in need of funding to sustain its programs and its ability to meet the many needs of the community; however, Caritas is unable to bear these burdens because its capacity is limited<sup>(2)</sup>.

### **Fifth: Monastic associations:**

There are four religious orders in Gaza, most of them women. The first is the Mother Teresa nuns, who arrived in Palestine in 1973 and lived in the priest's monastery where the Latin Patriarchate built a house for them. The nuns cared for the poorest of the poor and the elderly. The second order is the Little Sisters of Jesus, who arrived in Gaza in 1977 and worked in a kindergarten and school for Palestinian women, and a school for people with special needs. The nuns lived in the Al-Rimal neighborhood among families, but they left Gaza in 2012 due to their advanced age and the lack of monastic vocations. The third order is the<sup>(3)</sup> They are the Rosary Sisters who arrived in Gaza in 1980 to manage the Latin parish school. They are three in number. As for the fourth religious order, it is the Incarnate Word Sisters. They arrived in 2009 to take the place of the Rosary Sisters in serving the parish and the school. Most of them are from Argentina and Spain. Six nuns from India arrived in Palestine six months ago. They work in the House of Love and Peace<sup>(4)</sup>.

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(1) Caritas Jerusalem website <https://2u.pw/yXfJGgB>.

(2) Interview: Anton, George: op. cit.

(3) Madabiel, Boutros: Op. cit, pp. 62, 63.

(4) Interview: Anton, Nisreen, Program Director at the Latin Monastery Church, Gaza, Palestine 8/2/2023.

Dar Al-Mahabbah Wal-Salam is considered one of the most important monastic associations in Gaza. It is located in the vicinity of the Latin Monastery Church. It was founded by the nuns of Mother Teresa in 1973 to house the nuns of charity and embrace the disabled, whose number reached about 85 residents, including 32 children with special physical and mental needs. Those who reach adulthood are transferred to the nursing home, which is divided into two sections: females and males, all of whom are Muslims. The nuns of charity serve them. The center is managed by the nun Matilda from India, who provides special and superior care for the children with a humanitarian message<sup>(1)</sup>.

The center is affiliated with the Jerusalem Nuns, and six nuns work there, three in the children's shelter, and the same number in the elderly home, who live in the same shelter, and are replaced every period according to the distribution of the nuns from Jordan. Matilda points out that the challenges facing the nuns are: "The difference in their culture with the Gazan society when they go out in their uniform from their place of residence to other places in Gaza City while shopping or going on trips or visiting the children's families, as they are looked at with surprise"<sup>(2)</sup>.

It provides accommodation, care, rehabilitation and therapeutic medications for children and the elderly. Children are selected by their parents according to their condition after submitting a request to accommodate them, and studying the families' situation in terms of poverty and disability. Most of them have special needs. Parents are allowed to visit them on Fridays and Saturdays of each week. The number of employees is approximately 30 employees, in addition to the volunteer team (MOV), including a physical therapist and a psychologist. Their salaries are funded by Catholic Relief Services, and sometimes the home pays them a monthly salary<sup>(3)</sup>.

Government institutions also provide therapeutic medicines, the Ministry of Social Affairs distributes food and monthly food vouchers, and UNRWA contributes monthly - in partnership with the World Health Organization - to basics such as sugar, tea, rice and flour, while the rest of the vegetables, fruits and cleaning materials are purchased from the nuns' budget, which they receive from external donations<sup>(4)</sup>.

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(1) Interview: Saba, Suhail, Member of the Church Council of Representatives, Gaza, Palestine 7/3/2023.

(2) Interview, Matilda, Director of the Love and Peace Center, Gaza, Palestine 2/8/2023.

(3) Interview, Lama Tamraz: Physiotherapist, Shelter Center, Gaza, Palestine 2/8/2023.

(4) Interview, Matilda, Director of the Love and Peace Center, Gaza, Palestine, 8/2/2023.



### **Sixth: The Papal Mission in Jerusalem:**

It was founded on 6/18/1949 by Pope Francis to serve refugees in their social and economic conditions<sup>(1)</sup>, It is present in more than one branch abroad, such as Egypt, Jordan and Lebanon, and is subject to the authority of the Pope<sup>(2)</sup>, The Papal Mission serves Christian institutions in the Gaza Strip that do not differentiate between the Palestinian people as a whole. It is the third employer after the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees (UNRWA) and the Palestinian government, due to the diversity of its activities and programs. The mission works in partnership with the Church Federation, and in contracts with Young Men's Christian Associations, and provides psychological support in Beit Hanoun, Gaza and Rafah, and builds projects and develops the capabilities of youth.

Among these projects is a project with the German Foundation, lasting six months for three years, providing psychological support after the ongoing Israeli wars and attacks on the Gaza Strip. The mission's message remains the same from 1948 until today. The mission has partnered with several institutions, such as the Orthodox Cultural Center Foundation, which serves Palestinian youth without any discrimination, and has provided support to the Arab National Hospital and Caritas, with all its health, social and relief services.

The mission deals with institutions, not individuals. Tarzi mentions that there is only one case in which individuals were dealt with during the Israeli aggression on 5/9/2023 AD, where a house was rented for an elderly Palestinian woman who lives alone and whose house was completely demolished, and she has no one to support her. This is the exceptional case that the mission dealt with.

The mission played a pioneering role in confronting the challenges facing the Christian community in the Gaza Strip. Its mission is to support and consolidate the Christian presence of young people and others, and to provide internal scholarships, i.e. at the level of Palestinian universities operating in the Gaza Strip, such as Al-Azhar University, Al-Quds Open University, the Islamic University, and Palestine University; but according to the standards and priorities determined by the papal mission and the economic situation of the Christian applicants. As for external scholarships, they are conditional upon returning to the homeland.

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(1) The Monk, Metri: Op. cit.

(2) Interview: Tarzi, Sami, Coordinator of the Papal Mission Projects in Gaza, Gaza, Palestine, 7/11/2023.

The mission encourages students and graduates to volunteer in the Rosary Sisters, prepare reports, and write research to prepare and qualify students for the labor market, and provide them with job skills in partner institutions. Due to the lack of equal opportunities between Muslims and Christians, the mission implemented several employment projects during the period between 2014-2019 according to the unemployment program, and a number of them were absorbed into jobs in private institutions. There is also the employment project that was implemented in 2018 in the private hospital, during which 18 Muslim and Christian employees were appointed for a year with funding from the papal mission, in addition to following up on students until employment because their information is available to the papal mission and asking about them<sup>(1)</sup>.

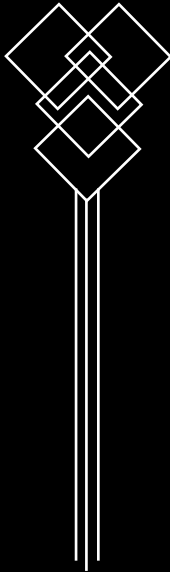
Christian institutions operating in the Gaza Strip play an important and primary role in strengthening the steadfastness of the Palestinian citizen in the Gaza Strip, in light of the socio-economic challenges that the Strip suffers from. They also play an important cultural, cognitive and enlightening role, as they contribute to enriching the Palestinian cultural movement. In addition to their educational, scientific and cognitive role, they contribute to strengthening the Palestinian artistic movement, through theater, music and arts programs, in addition to the relief role that is no less important than the other roles, in light of the deteriorating humanitarian conditions in the Gaza Strip, as a result of the continued siege and division.

What Christian relief services institutions provide to Palestinian society indicates - beyond any doubt - that they are Palestinian national institutions that existed before the existence of Palestinian governmental institutions, and that they carried out their activities before the launch of the work of local and international civil society institutions at all levels. The institutions provided a cultural and educational atmosphere, and spread the spirit of tolerance, brotherhood and harmony among members of Palestinian society.



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(1) Personal interview: Rami Tarazi, op. cit.



## **CHAPTER FOUR**

# **THE POLITICAL AND SECURITY SITUATION AND ITS RELATIONSHIP TO THE CHRISTIAN PRESENCE IN GAZA**

**The first topic: The internal Palestinian situation and its impact on the Christian community in Gaza**

**The second topic: The Siege and Israeli Wars and Their Relationship to the Christian Community in Gaza**





## Chapter Four

### The Political and Security Situation and Its Relationship to the Christian Presence in Gaza

There is a historical and cultural legacy between Palestine and the Christian presence, considering that Palestine is the birthplace of Christ, and it contains the Church of the Resurrection and the Nativity, and it contains historical Christian cities, and it is considered a destination for all Christians in the world, such as Nazareth, Bethlehem, and Jerusalem, and thus the connection between Christianity and Palestine is a historical, cultural, and religious connection, as the Christian presence in Palestine is an authentic presence<sup>(1)</sup>. Christian Arabs have always been at the forefront of the confrontation with the Zionist project and the British occupation since the Balfour Declaration in 1917. They worked with effort, sincerity and dedication to confront this international conspiracy, and they had a national presence in all the popular uprisings and uprisings before the Nakba. After the Nakba, they suffered from displacement in 1948 like the rest of the Palestinian people. They also had a great national presence in the national work in leading the Palestinian factions and the Palestinian cultural and intellectual movement<sup>(2)</sup>. The Christian presence in Gaza is ancient and linked to the birth of Jesus Christ. It has been an authentic presence for approximately 1,700 years since the fourth century AD. It is rooted in the land and part of the cultural and civilizational identity of the Palestinian people, but it has begun to suffer from many political, security, economic and social challenges.

Palestinian Christians are Palestinian Arabs, and they are an integral part of the Palestinian Arab people. They have historical extensions in Palestine and in Gaza specifically since the year 395 AD. It is a civilizational, historical and religious extension linked to the Palestinian land and identity despite all the challenges<sup>(3)</sup>. Despite the importance of these historical roots for the Christian presence in Gaza, the political reality, the internal Palestinian crisis, and the ongoing division have become a serious and dangerous threat to its survival and continuity, especially in light of the decreasing numbers.

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(1) Interview: Abu Dhareefa, Wajih, Head of the Palestinian Center for Cultural Dialogue and Development, and Member of the Political Bureau of the People's Party, Gaza, Palestine, 7-11-2023.

(2) Interview: Darwish, Yousry, Head of the Union of Cultural Centers in Gaza, and Member of the Palestinian National Council, Gaza, Palestine, 7/4/2023.

(3) Interview: Ayyad, Kamel: Public Relations Manager at St.Porphyrus Church, Gaza, Palestine, 6/18/2023.



## The first topic

### The internal Palestinian situation and its impact on the Christian community in Gaza

The internal Palestinian situation has contributed to placing many major challenges before the Palestinian people at all levels - political, economic, social and cultural. The division has struck at the system of values and belonging, and imposed additional challenges on the Palestinian citizen. It has also affected the Christian presence in Palestine in general, and in Gaza in particular, which is suffering from many challenges and crises.

Christian Arabs in Palestine and Gaza are a large and important part of the national and struggle effort of the Palestinian people, and they have their national, struggle, cultural and cognitive contributions like the rest of the Palestinian Arab people. The Christian presence in Gaza is an Arab Palestinian presence that is not only linked to religion; rather, it is linked to history, national identity, and cultural and intellectual heritage. They suffer like the rest of the Palestinian community as a result of the occupation, siege and hateful division<sup>(1)</sup>. The Christian presence in Gaza is a major component of the Palestinian national fabric of the Palestinian people. It has provided historical leadership for the national movement and the path of national struggle, produced community leaders, and led the cultural movement in Palestine and Gaza<sup>(2)</sup>.

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(1) Interview: Saba, Issa: President of the Canaan Cultural Institute, and former President of the Young Men's Christian Association, Gaza, Palestine, 6/12/2023.

(2) Interview: Abu Ramadan, Mohsen, Director of Dr. Haider Abdel Shafi Center for Culture and Development, and Member of the Palestinian National Council, Gaza, Palestine, 6/19/2023.

**First: The crisis of the Palestinian political system and its impact on the Christian community in Gaza:**

The crisis of the Palestinian political system has left serious repercussions on all Palestinian sectors and groups, and has contributed to adding new challenges to many and varied groups, such as youth, women, and the Christian community in Gaza. It has led to a state of alienation among young people and pushed them to emigrate, and has placed the entire Palestinian society in front of a fateful challenge related to the continuation of the state of dispersion, fragmentation, and confusion. In light of each party's insistence on clinging to its continuation, the Palestinian division has struck all aspects of Palestinian political life, led to the disruption of democratic practice and political participation, and left political, security, and economic repercussions on all groups of the Palestinian people at home and abroad..

The sharp polarization between Fatah and Hamas resulted from the emergence of Hamas as a strong competitor to Fatah after many years of the movement's dominance over the PLO and the Palestinian political system. The emergence of Hamas with its "constructive Islamic jihadist" project represented a threat to Fatah's control over Palestinian political life. In a short period, the relationship between Fatah and Hamas moved from intense competition to violent conflict, despite the absence of fundamental differences on the national issue, as the two parties experienced ideological conflict and social competition<sup>(1)</sup>.

The violent takeover of the Gaza Strip by Hamas on June 14, 2007, is an inevitable result of the events that preceded it and the beginning of the destruction of the national project, through the separation of the Gaza Strip and the creation of an independent entity far from the PLO and the Palestinian Authority. After the division, matters were directed - in a deliberate manner - to strengthen and consolidate the process of separation between the Gaza Strip and the West Bank, and to deal with the Gaza Strip as an independent political entity, through the siege operations, military aggression, and repeated wars as mechanisms and requirements for consolidating the division, strengthening the disparity between the West Bank and the Gaza Strip, and drawing attention to what is happening in Gaza to divert attention from the settlement and Judaization operations in the West Bank and Jerusalem<sup>(2)</sup>.

With the entry of Hamas into the political system following the legislative

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(1) Abu Amer, Adnan: Islamic movements and political and democratic participation (Hamas as a model), *Siyasat Magazine*, Issue 30, Palestine Policy Institute, Ramallah, Palestine, 2014, p.48.

(2) Ibrash, Ibrahim, *The War on Gaza: The Future of the National Project (War as One of the Mechanisms for Creating the State of Gaza)*, *Siyasat Magazine*, Issue 30, Palestinian Policy Institute, Ramallah, Palestine, 2014, p.16.

elections in 2006, the conflict between the two movements quickly shifted from a conflict of political programs and orientations to a conflict of influence and powers. It transformed from a conflict of interests between Fatah leaders to a conflict of programs and titles, and a conflict of settlement and international support versus resistance, reform, and popular legitimacy. This resulted in a political division in service, military, and judicial institutions and administrations, which also created a crisis that does not seem to end soon except with the return of the two parties to dialogue, focusing on the internal situation, and restoring cohesion to the Palestinian national project<sup>(1)</sup>. The year 2007 was a turning point in the lives of Palestinians in the Gaza Strip. After the events of June 2007, two Palestinian entities emerged: one in the West Bank led by the factions of the Palestine Liberation Organization, and the other in the Gaza Strip led by the Islamic Resistance Movement Hamas. These events resulted in tightening the siege imposed on the Gaza Strip by closing the Rafah crossing and the crossings with the Israeli side, in addition to the repeated Israeli attacks on the Gaza Strip, which culminated in the December 2008-January 2009 war and the November 2012 war, which left a large number of martyrs and wounded, in addition to the great destruction that befell the infrastructure in general, and the immeasurable social and psychological problems among different groups<sup>(2)</sup>.

The Palestinian division has had repercussions on the overall Palestinian situation, and has left serious effects on the overall political, economic, social and cultural conditions in the Palestinian political arena - and in the Gaza Strip in particular - and has cast its shadow over all segments of Palestinian society, especially the Christian community in Gaza.

The Palestinian division dealt a severe blow to the Christian presence in Gaza, as the division weakened the capacity of the Christian community in Gaza and deprived it of many factors of resilience. The absence of democratic practice and legislative and municipal elections in the Gaza Strip in particular contributed to the decline in the representation of the Christian community in decision-making centers, as there were previously seats allocated to Christians in some municipalities, and the absence of elections contributed to the decline in the representation of our Christian brothers in

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(1) Maryam Itani: *The Power Conflict between Fatah and Hamas in the Administration of the Palestinian Authority 2006-2007*, edited by Mohsen Saleh, (Al-Zaytouna Center for Studies and Consultations in Beirut 2008), p.115.

(2) Murad, Rami, and others: *Op. cit.*, p.15.

Palestinian political life<sup>(1)</sup>, There is a decline in the participation rates of the Christian community in Gaza in political life, due to the absence of democratic practice and periodic elections that could push more young people in the Christian community to engage in political and societal life. This requires greater attention from the political forces to the young men and women within the Christian community in Gaza by being keen to attract them<sup>(2)</sup>.

Regarding the internal Palestinian situation and its relationship with the Christian community in Gaza, the results indicated that (45.61%) believe that the continuation of the Palestinian division and internal crisis constitute the greatest challenge facing the Christian presence in Gaza.(49.12%) believe that the absence of democratic practice and periodic elections constitutes a challenge to the Christian presence in Gaza, and (78.95%) believe that the emergence of manifestations of religious extremism constitutes a threat to the Christian presence in Gaza; however, (51.32%) of the sample confirmed that they feel safe in Gaza and there is no need to worry.(47.37%) stated that they do not feel alienated in Gaza, and do not think about emigrating as a result. Regarding the importance of immersion in Palestinian political and civil life in the Gaza Strip, the results indicated that (42.1%) of the sample oppose immersion in Palestinian political life, compared to (38.6%) who emphasize the importance of this matter, while (19.30%) remained neutral

With the absence of democratic practice and the adoption of appointments in student, municipal and union councils, the Christian presence was absent from most of the councils concerned by the Hamas government in Gaza. The municipal councils in Gaza City have not included any Christian element since Hamas took control of the Strip, although they were present in most of the municipal councils of Gaza City since the Ottoman rule.

However, Hamas recently made up for the absence of representation of the Christian community in the municipal council in Gaza City, and called for the inclusion of a number of Christians in the relevant municipal councils in the Gaza Strip during the recent period, but there was a refusal from many members of the Christian community to respond to these calls for various reasons, including fear of being banned by the Israeli occupation, and fear of the Palestinian Authority in Ramallah; but in general, the movement

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(1) Interview: Darwish, Yousry, Head of the Union of Cultural Centers in Gaza, and Member of the Palestinian National Council, Gaza, Palestine, 7/4/2023.

(2) Interview: Tarzi, Sami, Coordinator of the Papal Mission Projects in Gaza, Gaza, Palestine, 7/11/2023.

succeeded in appointing one of the Christian brothers within the formation of the last municipal council of Gaza City<sup>(1)</sup>.

Neither the Palestinian political forces, nor the local community, nor the Authority or the Hamas government did what was necessary to support the steadfastness of the Christian community in Gaza, which contributed to the weak political and societal participation of many members of the Christian community in Palestine and Gaza due to the division of all the previous forces<sup>(2)</sup>. Most of the Christian youth in Gaza do not have a political affiliation. They are far from Palestinian political life for various reasons, some of which are related to the decline in democratic practice, and some of which are related to the fear and anxiety that most of the youth feel when dealing with political issues<sup>(3)</sup>.

The Christian citizen in Gaza has begun to suffer, as has the rest of the Palestinian society, as a result of the ongoing division. In addition, the Christian community feels the crisis more, given the size of the economic, social, political and security challenges left behind by the Palestinian division, which has cast its shadow strongly on the Christian presence in Gaza<sup>(4)</sup>.

The Christian community in Gaza suffers from a lack of jobs and constant security and political tension due to the Israeli siege and wars. Although the Christian community in Gaza is linked to the national and ethnic identity and to its land - in terms of the penetration of religious identity, national identity and Arab nationalism into the consciousness and culture of the Christian citizen in Palestine and Gaza in particular - the Palestinian division has left serious repercussions on the Christian presence in Gaza<sup>(5)</sup>.

The repercussions of the Palestinian division and the exit of the Palestinian Authority on the Christian community in Gaza include: increased poverty and unemployment rates, and scarcity of employment opportunities, which prompted large numbers of Christian youth in Gaza to leave in search of a

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(1) Interview: Naim, Basem, Head of the Political Department of Hamas in Gaza, and Head of Relations with the Christian Community in Gaza, Gaza, Palestine, 8/14/2023.

(2) Interview: Abu Dharifa, Wajih, Head of the Palestinian Center for Cultural Dialogue and Development, op.cit.

(3) Interview: J.A., a youth activist from the Christian community in Gaza, 6/26/2023.

(4) Interview: Anton, George: Administrative Director of Caritas Jerusalem, Gaza, Palestine 7/6/2023.

(5) Interview 2: Al-Jilda, Elias, Member of the Church Council of Representatives, Gaza, Palestine, 6/6/2023 AD.

job opportunity or external education<sup>(1)</sup>. The absence of the Authority and the PLO from Gaza contributed to increasing the anxiety of the Christian community, and pushed large numbers to leave Gaza, as a result of the security, political and economic challenges. The religious discourse of some extremist fundamentalist movements also contributed to increasing the intensity of the anxiety of the Christian community in Gaza. According to estimates, the Christian presence in Gaza during the Authority's time was estimated at about 3,500. Now the number does not exceed 1,000, and most of them are elderly people and children, who are unable to take the risk of immigration<sup>(2)</sup>. There is a state of lack of immersion and integration into society by Christian citizens in Gaza. The Christian citizen himself now prefers to separate from the local community, and is content with being present only in some Christian institutions as a private space for himself, and leaves the rest of the institutions and political party and union work, unlike the situation in the past. The Christian presence was an effective and influential presence in political and societal life in the Gaza Strip in the past, so the effective and positive participation by members of the Christian community itself declined, which led to a decline in the presence of the Christian presence on the political and social levels<sup>(3)</sup>.

The Palestinian political parties - especially the leftist parties - have not done what they should have done to support the Christian presence in Gaza. There is no longer any representation of the Christian presence in the higher bodies of the Palestinian parties, and just as Christian figures have declined in leading political and social work as a result of the challenges of reality, the decline in the numbers of the Christian presence in Gaza has cast its shadow on the political and societal participation of this society, which requires all political forces - especially the left - to re-strengthen the Christian presence in their ranks<sup>(4)</sup>. "After the establishment of the Palestinian Authority (1994 following the Oslo Peace Accords), there was hope for political and economic stability, which encouraged a large number of Christians to return." He added, "However, the outbreak of the Second Intifada (late 2000) and the tightening of the siege on the Gaza Strip following Hamas's control over it in 2007 pushed Christians to emigrate again." Ayyad stressed that "the phenomenon of emigration is widespread among Palestinian Muslims and Christians alike; however, its impact is not

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(1) Interview 2: Ayyad, Kamel: Public Relations Manager at St.Porphyrus Church, Gaza, Palestine, 6/18/2023.

(2) Interview: M.A., Youth Activity, Gaza, Palestine, 6/26/2023.

(3) Interview: Shaaban, Omar, Director of PalTink Foundation for Strategic Studies, Gaza, Palestine, 8/9/2023.

(4) Interview: Darwish, Yusri, Head of the Union of Cultural Centers in Gaza, and Member of the Palestinian National Council, op.cit.

apparent among Muslims due to their large numbers and high fertility.” He added, “The decline in the number of Christian births has contributed to the sharp decline in their numbers, as a single Christian family has had to have one or two children due to the deteriorating economic situation resulting from the Israeli siege. My grandfather had eight children, my father had four, and I had only three”<sup>(1)</sup>.

The division and internal Palestinian crisis constitute the greatest challenge facing the Christian community in Gaza, as the division has affected all segments of Palestinian society, led to the decline of the Palestinian economy, and contributed to pushing large numbers of young people to emigrate<sup>(2)</sup>. As part of the Palestinian community in the Gaza Strip, the Christians of Gaza suffered what the rest of society suffered, from the difficult living conditions that accompanied the siege, the lack of security as a result of the Israeli attacks and the consequences of the internal Palestinian division, in addition to their deprivation - especially the youth - from celebrating their religious holidays in the Holy Land<sup>(3)</sup>. The economic conditions in the Gaza Strip, the Palestinian conflict between Fatah and Hamas, and the harassment of the Hamas government are the main reasons that have pushed Christians to emigrate. The violence may have caused the Christian population in Gaza to dwindle, as thousands of Christians have fled the area due to poor economic conditions and discrimination over the past fifteen years<sup>(4)</sup>.

The crisis of the Palestinian political system has left serious repercussions on the overall situation in the Palestinian political arena, and not just on the Christian presence. Despite the decline in opportunities for political participation as a result of the division, the Christian community in Gaza is suffering like the rest of the segments of society, and there is no special case for the Christian community<sup>(5)</sup>. The Palestinian division is considered a disaster for Palestinian society in general and for the Christian community in Gaza in particular, as it has weakened most segments of Palestinian society and increased the challenges of the Christian presence in Gaza<sup>(6)</sup>.

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(1) Interview, Kamel Ayyad, op.cit., and Dahman, Raba: Gaza’s Christians are declining, Anadolu Agency, January 8, 2013, available at <https://bit.ly/46RGeNW>.

(2) Interview: Al-Tarzi, Rami, Director of the Arab Orthodox Cultural Center, Gaza, Palestine, 6/19/2023.

(3) Murad, Rami, and others: Op. cit, p.15.

(4) Number of Christians in Gaza Dwindles Amid Hamas Rule and Difficulties in Work, Rashid Center, 5/30/2021, available at <https://bit.ly/3Dh9MHl>.

(5) Interview: Saba, Issa: Head of the Canaan Cultural Institute, op.cit.

(6) Interview: Al-Jilda, Awda, Executive Director of the Federation of Churches, and Member of the Board of Directors of the YMCA, Gaza, Palestine, 7/5/2023.



## **Second: The situation of the Christian community in Gaza after the division:**

With Hamas' control over Gaza, numerous indicators and reports have emerged of a decline in the state of human rights and public freedoms, restrictions on cultural institutions, the prevention of concerts, and the movement's attempt to impose a specific pattern of societal values that preserve public life in Gaza<sup>(1)</sup>. Before the division and during the era of the Palestinian Authority in Gaza, the Christian community practiced its religious rituals with complete freedom. We used to light the Christmas tree in the Square of the Unknown Soldier in Gaza, and celebrate New Year's with complete freedom. Now all of that has become forbidden, as the Hamas government in Gaza prevents New Year's celebrations on Christmas Eve, and this is considered a violation of religious rights<sup>(2)</sup>. There are some harassments in practicing religious rituals. A Christian woman in Gaza reported that she cannot wear a cross or hang it in her car, or any religious symbols that indicate that she is Christian, because she is exposed to many harassments and provocations by some segments of society as a result<sup>(3)</sup>. The absence of religious rituals during the Christian holiday season represents a clear violation of freedom of belief, especially since the Christians of Gaza during the time of the Authority practiced their religious rituals with greater freedom. However, now there are many harassments that prevent the organization of the march of scout groups in the streets of Gaza, and the lighting of the Christmas tree in the Square of the Unknown Soldier, in addition to the emergence of extremist religious discourse calling on citizens not to congratulate Christians on their birthdays<sup>(4)</sup>.

With the formation of the Palestinian Authority, the Christian presence in Gaza was strengthened, as a result of the support that the late President Yasser Arafat provided to the Christian community in Gaza. However, after the division - and as a result of Hamas's control over the Strip - new challenges emerged for this community, as a result of anxiety about religious discourse. However, Hamas worked to reassure this community, and worked to establish good relations with most of its components<sup>(5)</sup>.

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(1) Interview: Abu Dhareefa, Wajih, op. cit.

(2) Interview: Ayyad, Kamel: Public Relations Manager at St.Porphyrus Church, Gaza, Palestine, 6/18/2023.

(3) Interview: S.S., a woman and community activist who preferred to remain anonymous, Gaza, Palestine, 6/26/2023.

(4) Interview: Anton, George: Administrative Director of Caritas Jerusalem, op.cit.

(5) Interview: Abu Ramadan, Mohsen, Director of Dr.Haider Abdel Shafi Center for Culture and Development, Gaza, Palestine, 6/19/2023.



A young man from the Christian community in Gaza pointed out - during the meeting with him - that there are many harassments related to the practice of religious rituals in Gaza, and he pointed out that the situation in Gaza under the division is completely opposite to what things were like during the time of the Authority. The space for religious freedoms for the Christian community in Gaza has shrunk, as there are no longer scout groups roaming the streets as used to happen, and the Christmas tree is no longer lit in the Square of the Unknown Soldier as used to happen during the time of the Authority<sup>(1)</sup>. Despite this, the historical presence of Christians in this region is rooted, but their numbers are gradually decreasing, especially since 2006, after the collusion of internal and external circumstances since Hamas took control of the Gaza Strip in 2007, so Christians and others were subjected to the restrictions of division. It is estimated that only about 1,000 Christians remain in the Gaza Strip. Christians in the Gaza Strip today are divided into three groups. There are Christians who are the original inhabitants of Gaza and have lived there since ancient times, and others who immigrated to it after Israel declared its independence in 1948. The third group are those who were abroad and came in 1994 with the late Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat, and they are still there today<sup>(2)</sup>.

Small communities are quickly affected by any transformations or changes that occur in the political or economic environment, so the Christian community in Gaza was one of the groups most affected by the division that occurred in the Palestinian political system after Hamas took control of the Gaza Strip. The Christian citizen in Gaza suffers as the ordinary citizen does, but the division increased some other challenges, and led to a shortage in numbers in light of the scarcity of job opportunities, which prompted large numbers of young people to emigrate in search of a job opportunity or a better life<sup>(3)</sup>.

The division has succeeded in creating new realities in the Gaza Strip under the leadership of the Hamas movement's ruling authority, in which the monopoly and individualization of political decision-making and management of public affairs are no less evident, as well as the marginalization of political and societal forces and civil society institutions.

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(1) Interview: M.A., a youth activist from the Christian community, Gaza, Palestine, 6/26/2023.

(2) Number of Christians in Gaza Dwindles Amid Hamas Rule and Difficulties in Work, Rashid Center, 5/30/2021, available at <https://bit.ly/3Dh9MHi>.

(3) Interview: Anton, George: Administrative Director of Caritas Jerusalem, Gaza, Palestine 7/6/2023.

This rule still suffers from the absence of a clear strategy, which creates a vacuum that reflects itself on political and societal life<sup>(1)</sup>.

(94.74%) of the sample indicated that strengthening the Christian presence in Gaza requires a wider space of freedoms for cultural institutions and increased financial support. This indicates the importance of strengthening the space of public and private freedoms for the Christian community, especially in practicing religious rituals, and not influencing Christmas celebrations, whether through reactionary religious discourse or by restricting New Year's Eve parties.(66.66%), and they stressed that the Palestinian political parties and forces are not doing enough to strengthen the Christian presence on the political and economic levels, indicating the extent of the decline in the political role of the Palestinian factions in strengthening the Christian presence in Gaza.

These results indicate the importance of granting more public freedoms, and reducing hate speech and extremism that is sometimes issued by some individuals or groups, which leads to reassuring this society, and reducing the state of anxiety, to facilitate the process of integrating it into political and societal life to a greater extent.

The harassment practiced by the Hamas government authorities in Gaza at the beginning of the division contributed to threatening the Christian presence in Gaza. Preventing the celebration of Christmas, lighting the tree in the Square of the Unknown Soldier, and preventing scout groups from roaming the streets of Gaza to celebrate New Year's and Christmas, all of which represented a violation of the religious rights of the Christian community in Gaza. However, at this time, the severity of these violations has decreased due to the accumulation of experience that those in power in Gaza have gained regarding the Christian presence<sup>(2)</sup>.The doctrine of religious isolation that governs the Gaza Strip is not compatible with the Christian presence in Gaza. There is existential anxiety among many members of the Christian community in Gaza as a result of the practices of the Hamas government, especially at the beginning of the division. There are no guarantees of freedom of religious practice, and there is also an absence of a sense of full citizenship in light of the challenges of the political, economic and social situation<sup>(3)</sup>.

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(1) Suleiman, Fahd, Deputy Secretary-General of the Democratic Front, a paper entitled How to Confront the Annexation Project, Ramallah, Palestine, 2023 AD, p.12.

(2) Interview: Darwish, Yusri, Head of the Union of Cultural Centers in Gaza, op.cit.

(3) Interview: With a member of the Christian community in Gaza who preferred to remain anonymous, June 25, Gaza, Palestine.

Issam Younis, Director of the Al Mezan Center for Human Rights, believes that “the decline in the human rights situation in Gaza, in light of the deteriorating economic and social conditions, and the presence of human rights violations, represents a repellent environment - not only for the Christian presence, but for all members of Palestinian society - especially since the Strip suffers from high rates of poverty and unemployment, and the lack of personal security and livelihood security is a motive for migration and exit from the Strip”<sup>(1)</sup>.

In contrast, Hamas views the Christian community in Gaza as an authentic and ancient presence, rooted in the Palestinian land. Hamas’s vision for dealing with this presence is based on the value background emphasized by the Islamic religion, the Covenant of Omar, and the revolutionary background, considering that the movement is part of the Palestinian national liberation movement, which enhances peaceful coexistence and national partnership. The movement also rejects all attacks that have occurred against the Christian community in Gaza, and considers them individual actions that do not reflect the spirit of tolerance emphasized by the teachings of the Islamic religion. The movement’s apparatuses and the government have confronted and limited them, as everyone is fully aware of the importance of the Christian presence remaining in Gaza as part of the state of religious and social coexistence<sup>(2)</sup>.

In the Gaza Strip, since Hamas took control of the area, attacks on Christian institutions have been increasing; a Christian bookseller was even killed in October 2007. These attacks, attributed to small, unidentified armed groups, raise fear among the city’s Christian population, but also concern among the international community<sup>(3)</sup>. Christians faced difficulties at times after Hamas took power in the Strip, and after the emergence of some extremist Salafist groups that targeted some Christian institutions with bombings and burning, where two were killed in 2007 and 2009 due to a robbery incident and religious disputes. The disputes escalated during the Hamas rule when the Orthodox Church accused the "Association of Muslim Scholars" in a statement of kidnapping five Christians and forcing them to convert to Islam in the summer of 2012, which sparked widespread controversy within the

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(1) Interview: Younis, Issam, Director of Al Mezan Center for Human Rights, Gaza, Palestine, 7/23/2023.

(2) Interview: Naim, Basem, Head of the Political Department of Hamas in Gaza, op.cit.

(3) Sossie, Andezian, Christian Palestinians and national construction, *Confluences Méditerranée* 2008, p 70.

Gaza society<sup>(1)</sup>. Dozens of members of the Christian community in Gaza organized a sit-in inside the Greek Orthodox Church in Gaza City to protest what they described as the forced conversion of one of their community members to Islam. They confirmed that the incident was repeated with a mother and her daughters at one time. Some figures accused a well-known Islamic figure of being behind the aforementioned incidents, which cause tension between Muslims and Christians in Gaza. The Bishop of the Church in the Strip, Bishop (Alexios), said in a press statement during the sit-in that the young man (R.A., 24 years old) was kidnapped by an Islamic group last Saturday, 7/14/2012, after being pressured to change his religion from Christianity to Islam<sup>(2)</sup>.

The Palestinian Center for Human Rights in Gaza denied the accusations of the Orthodox Church in the Gaza Strip that an Islamic group kidnapped 5 Christians, and confirmed that these people converted to Islam "of their own free will." This came after the Orthodox Church in the Gaza Strip issued a statement accusing an Islamic group of kidnapping five Christians in order to force them to convert to Islam. The director of the Legal Unit at the Palestinian Center for Human Rights (Iyad Al-Alami) said that "at the request of two Christian families, we held two separate meetings with (R.A., 24 years old) and (H.L., 32 years old) and their three daughters at the center's headquarters in Gaza. Al-Alami added that "their willingness to convert to Islam was confirmed"<sup>(3)</sup>.

Many reports and testimonies - especially from Hamas's opponents - indicate that the Christians of Gaza are being threatened and oppressed. At the beginning of the movement's rule in Gaza, there was a negative reality for the Christian presence, due to the actions of the Hamas government, its use of the term "Christian community", and the statement of the Hamas Ministry of Endowments not to congratulate Christians on their holidays, which left a feeling of insecurity among the Christian community in Gaza<sup>(4)</sup>.

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(1) Balousha, Hazem, Hamas and Christians in the Gaza Strip - Security Protection and Accusations of Discrimination, DW website, October 24, 2013, available at <https://p.dw.com/p/1A30V>.

(2) News: Sit-in at the Greek Orthodox Church.. Gaza Police: No Christian kidnapping in Gaza and the case is related to a citizen who declared his conversion to Islam, Samaa News Agency, July 16, 2012, available <https://2u.pw/fcnNoU6>.

(3) A human rights center in Gaza denies the kidnapping of 5 Christians, the website of the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine, July 17, 2012, available at <https://2u.pw/XZYU2Ar>.

(4) Interview: Tarzi, Samer, media professional and member of the Board of Directors of the Palestinian Journalists Syndicate, Gaza, Palestine, 6/6/2023.

The language of preaching used by Salafis in dealing with Christians poses a threat to this community. For example, Muslims are asked not to congratulate Christians on Christmas. Some incidents that can be described as “unique” have also been repeated. A hand grenade was thrown into the courtyard of the Latin Monastery Church in the Zeitoun neighborhood, southeast of Gaza City, on February 26, 2014. This was preceded by the writing of some inflammatory slogans on the walls of the church, including “In revenge for the Muslims of the Central African Republic,” and “The days are between us and you, worshippers of the cross.” Similar incidents occurred in February 2008, when the YMCA library was bombed, and in May 2008, when a hand grenade was thrown at the Rosary Sisters School, without causing any injuries<sup>(1)</sup>.

There is an individual religious discourse by some clerics that does not represent public opinion and is trying to target the Christian community in Gaza. It is true that it is considered a disturbing discourse; but it does not express public opinion, as the entire Palestinian community in Gaza understands the right of the Palestinian Christian citizen to practice his religious rituals with complete freedom, even if the celebration is absent in public places and is limited to places specific to the Christian community<sup>(2)</sup>. The problem with Hamas rule is in its institutions. The absence of a legislative council and oversight bodies left Hamas in Gaza and the Palestinian Authority in the West Bank free to assess the results of their behavior. However, although at the beginning of Hamas rule the human rights situation in Gaza was difficult, the movement - with the passage of time and the factor of time - improved its behavior a little, and it became able to accept criticism and deal more positively with issues of public freedoms<sup>(3)</sup>.

It cannot be considered that some individual incidents that occurred by some individuals towards the Christian community in Gaza are considered general policies of the Gaza government or the Hamas movement. Rather, the government has worked and is working to calm the Christian community by facilitating and resolving many of the daily disputes that occur with some Christian institutions, with the aim of establishing the Christian presence in Gaza, since the Hamas movement considers the continuation of this

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(1) Christians in Gaza – Sounding the Alarm, Phenix Center for Human Rights in the Middle East and North Africa, April 29, 2016, available at <https://2u.pw/r0nwJof>.

(2) Interview: Tarzi, Sami, Coordinator of the Papal Mission Projects in Gaza, Gaza, Palestine, 7/11/2023.

(3) Interview: Younis, Issam, Director of Al Mezan Center for Human Rights, Gaza, Palestine, 7/23/2023.

presence to be part of preserving the national, social and cultural fabric in the Gaza Strip<sup>(1)</sup>.

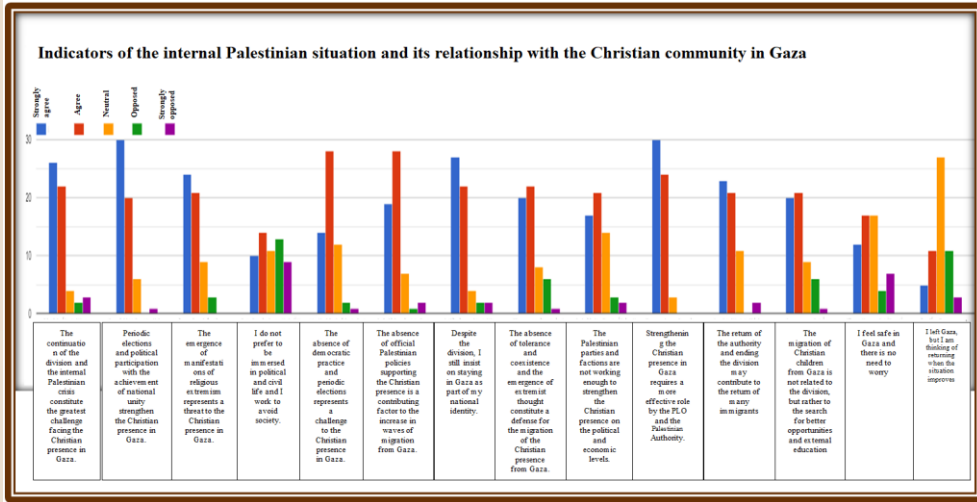


Figure (5): Christian community’s attitudes towards the repercussions of the division on the Christian community in Gaza

Hamas did not change the laws; rather, it changed the values of society. During the first years of the division, the movement tried to impose a specific pattern on Palestinian society, by trying to Islamize society, by imposing a set of restrictions on Palestinian society. This created a state of tension among a large number of the Christian community, which prompted some of them to leave Gaza, under the pressure of anxiety and poor socio-economic conditions<sup>(2)</sup>.

The religious discourse used by Hamas and other Islamic movements towards the Christian presence in Gaza represents a threat to this presence, such as the term “Christian community” and other terms such as “Christians,” which requires a reformulation of this religious discourse and raising awareness towards a discourse of tolerance and coexistence, to strengthen the Christian presence in Gaza<sup>(3)</sup>.

The Metropolitan of Gaza, Alexios, believes that the relationship with the ruling authority in Gaza is within its natural framework during all stages, as it did not change during Hamas rule, nor did the cooperation between the

(1) Interview: Naim, Basem, Head of the Political Department of Hamas in Gaza, and Head of Relations with the Christian Community in Gaza, Gaza, Palestine, 8/14/2023.

(2) Interview: Younis, Issam, op. cit.

(3) Interview 2: Al-Jilda, Elias, op. cit.

church and the authorities change, indicating that Hamas is very keen on the security of the church and Christians in the Gaza Strip. The Metropolitan went on to say that "there is more security at the current stage than before, especially after the outbreak of the second Palestinian Intifada in 2000. Before Hamas rule, there was security chaos and lawlessness in the Palestinian street, but currently we do not face any problems at all." He added, "Yes, there were some problems and some issues that occurred during that period as well as in previous periods; but it can be said that they do not go beyond being individual incidents"<sup>(1)</sup>. There is no doubt that the relationship between the Hamas government in Gaza and the Christian community is sometimes marred by some tension due to some statements and actions by individuals or bodies affiliated with the movement, although Christian clerics, out of their concern for national unity and societal cohesion, always emphasize the depth of the relationship that links the Christian presence in Gaza to the Hamas government.

### **Third: Extremist religious discourse and its impact on the Christian presence in Gaza:**

The emergence of extremist religious groups in Gaza during the years of division has added new challenges to the Christian community in Gaza, as this community, which lives in a state of constant anxiety as a result of the division, wars and the Israeli siege, has begun to suffer from the phenomenon of religious extremism and fanaticism in religious discourse towards it.

The transformations that struck Palestinian society in Gaza after the 1987 Intifada, and the transformation of society in Gaza into a conservative society, posed an additional challenge to the Christian community in Gaza, especially since the society's inclination towards conservative values contributed to strengthening the state of anxiety not only in the Christian community, but also in everyone who holds values and ideas that differ from the Islamic values that invaded all of Palestinian society, and were strengthened after the Hamas movement took control of Gaza<sup>(2)</sup>.

There is an extremist religious discourse issued by some imams of mosques in Gaza that contributes to increasing the state of anxiety and spreading a culture of intolerance, such as the call not to congratulate Christians on

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(1) Balousha, Hazem, Hamas and Christians in the Gaza Strip - Security Protection and Accusations of Discrimination, DW website, October 24, 2013, available at <https://p.dw.com/p/1A3OV>.

(2) Interview: Younis, Issam, Director of Al Mezan Center for Human Rights, Gaza, Palestine, 7/23/2023.

Christmas, or not to pray for mercy for the dead, as happened with (Shireen Abu Akleh), although the Palestinian people are known for their religious tolerance and coexistence between Muslims and Christians, but some voices that appear every period try to diminish the importance of the Christian presence in Gaza<sup>(1)</sup>.

The results of the study by the Palestinian Center for Christian Studies revealed other reasons that make Christians think about emigrating from the Palestinian territories, including the internal conditions that cause them concern, including “lack of security, fear of crime, absence of freedoms and the rule of law, and the spread of corruption.” A number of respondents also expressed their concern about “the presence of Salafist groups in Palestinian society.”<sup>(2)</sup> The religious discourse that is sometimes issued by some mosque imams regarding many issues and events constitutes a crisis that we are trying to avoid by emphasizing to the Ministry of Endowments the necessity of emphasizing to Friday preachers the necessity of staying away from problematic and provocative issues, and emphasizing the culture of coexistence and tolerance, as emphasized by the teachings of the true Islamic religion and the orientations of the Hamas movement. The problem of preachers is not only with what they issue towards the Christian community; rather, it is towards many thorny issues, which prompted the movement to intervene and prevent such transgressions<sup>(3)</sup>.

An internal circular from the Ministry of Endowments and Religious Affairs of the Islamic Resistance Movement "Hamas" in the Gaza Strip, regarding limiting interaction with New Year's celebrations "Christmas", has sparked a wave of controversy. The letter, addressed by the Director of the Preaching and Guidance Department to the Undersecretary of the Ministry of Endowments and Religious Affairs, included a series of activities that must be carried out during the Christian holiday season at the beginning of the year, with the aim of limiting interaction with Christmas celebrations, including field trips and media activities.

The statement, issued on December 15, 2020, created anger over what was seen as a call not to share Palestinian Christians' holidays. This was followed by a barrage of press releases between government agencies and civil society activists, with a number of activists considering the decision a

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(1) Interview: Anton, George: Administrative Director of Caritas Jerusalem, Gaza, Palestine 7/6/2023.

(2) A survey reveals the state of Palestinian Christians..a desire to emigrate in search of safety and equality, Alhurra TV, June 8, 2020, available at <https://bit.ly/3okqeCM>.

(3) Interview: Naim, Basem, op. cit.



“violation of Palestinian law,” and that the statement “strikes the social fabric, threatens national unity, and adds a new crisis instead of strengthening solidarity.” Palestinian politicians demanded that the statement be withdrawn, awareness sessions be organized for Ministry of Endowments employees on Palestinian history, the fact that the country is the birthplace of Christ, highlighting tolerance and civil peace, and the role of Palestinian Christians in all fields and crises, and stopping the annual controversy surrounding the organization of Christmas celebrations in Gaza<sup>(1)</sup>. The results indicated that (78.95%) believe that the emergence of manifestations of religious extremism represents a threat to the Christian presence in Gaza. However, (51.32%) of the sample confirmed that they feel safe in Gaza and there is no need to worry.(47.37%) reported that they do not feel alienated in Gaza, and are not thinking of emigrating as a result.

Omar Shaaban, director of the Pal Think Foundation, confirmed that the circular issued by the Ministry of Endowments in Gaza regarding Christmas celebrations represents a violation of Palestinian law, strikes at the social fabric and threatens national unity. He said: “Such a circular can only be issued by a mentality that sees nothing in the world but itself. Instead of strengthening unity and solidarity at this time, such a circular comes to add a new crisis”<sup>(2)</sup>. It seems that Hamas, its ministry, and the sheikhs in charge of the endowments, which have an army of preachers, religious guides, and orators, are still working on a narrow project. The issue is not related to tolerance and coexistence; rather, it is related to a discourse that is alien to Palestinian nationalism; rather, it is related to the value of the human being himself, his right, freedom of thought and belief, freedom of expression and respect for his rights, and living in a free, democratic society in which justice, fairness, and equality prevail<sup>(3)</sup>.

However, Hamas rejected the critical opinions of the Ministry of Endowments’ circular and considered them: (fishing in troubled waters).Dr.(Basem Naim), who was authorized by the movement to communicate with the Christian community in Gaza, saw that “the statements and articles that denounce and condemn – strongly – the Ministry’s circular, and consider it a “crime” and a “sin”, not only that; but

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(1) Al-Halou, Alaa, Controversy Accompanies Decision to Limit Christmas Celebrations in Gaza, Al-Araby Al-Jadeed Newspaper, December 20, 2020, available at <https://2u.pw/i0WwVRZ>

(2) Shaaban, Omar, Director of the PalThink Center for Strategic Studies, posted on Facebook, 12/20/2020.

(3) Ibrahim, Mustafa, On the Statement of the Ministry of Endowments and Christmas, Ma’an News Agency, December 19, 2020, available at <https://2u.pw/PNID3II>.

they appointed themselves as judges to distribute random rulings of “moderation and extremism”, “nationalism” and “treason”. He stressed that the position on the relationship with our Christian brothers is not the result of a political position or tactical effort for certain circumstances; rather, it is a religion and a belief with which we worship Glory be to Him, based on the commandment of the Holy Quran to be righteous and kind to them. Moreover, Hamas, throughout the movement’s lifespan, and I was a witness to many of its stations, and even before its official establishment, enjoyed strong and deep relations with the Christian family, with all its sects and churches, in the homeland and abroad, and are based on the concept of partnership in the homeland and neighborliness in residence, one pain and one dream<sup>(1)</sup>.

With the increase in angry reactions to this correspondence, the Ministry of Endowments in Gaza issued a statement in which it confirmed that: “The General Administration of Preaching and Guidance at the Ministry of Endowments has one of its most important duties to raise awareness and remind people of their religious duties and the legal rulings of Muslims, and to clarify the rulings and etiquette related to their faith, morals and worship, and the legal controls that must be adhered to in their social lives and their daily private and public dealings. Accordingly, the Ministry confirms in a definitive and unambiguous manner that the aforementioned correspondence has nothing to do with Christians holding their occasions and celebrations and practicing their religious rituals and their public life”<sup>(2)</sup>.

Hamas does not allow mosques and places of worship to be used to incite anxiety and fear among the Christian community in Gaza, nor does it allow any religious discourse or behavior that would affect the Christian presence in Gaza, as the movement considers this presence a gain on the national, religious, cultural and political levels, and works to preserve it through several means, including frequent visits by the movement’s leaders, the most important of which is the visit of the head of the Hamas political bureau, Mr. Ismail Haniyeh, to the Church of the Holy Family in Gaza. The movement views the survival of this community as part of the state of peaceful coexistence of Palestinian society in Gaza<sup>(3)</sup>.

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(1) Naim, Basem, Ministry of Endowments Circular and those who fish in troubled waters, *Dunya Al Watan* website, December 21, 2020, available at <https://2u.pw/V4JGM0g>.

(2) Clarification on the internal correspondence issued by the Ministry’s Preaching and Guidance Department regarding Christmas celebrations. Website of the Ministry of Endowments in Gaza, Gaza, Palestine, December 19, 2020, available at <https://2u.pw/2DOy4Ih>.

(3) Interview: Naim, Basem, op. cit.

Religious extremism and hostile rhetoric towards the Christian presence in Gaza have contributed to increasing anxiety among the Christian community in Gaza, especially since this rhetoric was accompanied by security, economic and social challenges, all of which have pushed a large number of members of the Christian community to leave Gaza<sup>(1)</sup>. There is a negative view among the Palestinian community in Gaza towards the Christian presence. This view is based on the fact that any girl who is not veiled or wears short clothes is Christian, even if she is not. This stereotype of the Christian woman has been reinforced by extremist religious discourse and some extremist groups that have a negative view of women in general and Christian women in particular<sup>(2)</sup>.

The extremist religious discourse towards the Christian community at the beginning of the division, and some of the individual attacks that occurred towards this community created a state of terror and severe anxiety among many members of this community, and pushed large numbers to leave Gaza, and also contributed to the isolation of this community from interacting with many public issues<sup>(3)</sup>. There are only 1,028 Christian individuals left in Gaza, distributed among 350 families, which means that the Christian community has lost more than two-thirds of its number during the years of division, as a result of the ongoing division, Israeli wars, and the challenges of the economic and social situation.<sup>(4)</sup> There is a complaint and great concern about the lack of security, fear of crime and theft, the absence of freedoms and the rule of law, and the spread of corruption. There is also a clear concern about the presence of Salafist religious groups in Palestinian society<sup>(5)</sup>.

The Middle East is going through many crises, perhaps the most harmful of which is the scourge of religious extremism, and the excommunication of others in the name of Allah, and even their killing and displacement. Religious extremism is not confined to a specific religion, as extremism exists among followers of all religions. There are extremist Christians, extremist Muslims, and extremist Jews, and there are political, economic,

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(1) Interview: Abu Dharifa, Wajih, Head of the Palestinian Center for Cultural Dialogue and Development, op. cit.

(2) Interview: S.S., a woman and community activist who preferred to remain anonymous, Gaza, Palestine, 6/26/2023.

(3) Interview: Darwish, Yousry, op. cit.

(4) Interview 2: Ayyad, Kamel: Public Relations Manager at St.Porphyrus Church, Gaza, Palestine, 6/18/2023.

(5) What are the reasons for the migration of Palestinian Christians and ways to reduce it? Radio Sawt Al-Balad website, Bethlehem, Palestine 2020 AD, available <https://bit.ly/3Pug79D>

and social reasons for the spread of the phenomenon of religious extremism<sup>(1)</sup>.

Professor Issa Saba believes that there is no need to worry about the phenomenon of extremism, because it is not directed at the Christian community only, but rather he believes that it is a general phenomenon that affects all categories of Palestinian and Arab society, and does not represent a threat to the Christian community in Gaza, especially since those who hold extremist thought are a minority that does not represent the general Palestinian people, who are dominated by affection, cohesion, and religious, cultural, and social coexistence. In addition, religious discourse does not pose a threat to the Christian presence in Gaza, because it is issued by a few and not by the general Muslim clerics<sup>(2)</sup>. Father Manuel Musallam also confirmed, "We do not suffer from direct persecution, and the government in the Gaza Strip does not differentiate between Christians and Muslims in terms of security, especially during times of war and crisis; but we are exposed from time to time to harassment and threats from extremist Islamic groups." Father Musallam denied the idea of fear for Christians in the Gaza Strip under any Muslim rule, regardless of its political orientation, describing Christians who leave their land or sell it and leave for any reason as "cowards"<sup>(3)</sup>.

In general, relations between Muslims and Christians in the Gaza Strip are described as "positive", as no significant problems have been recorded throughout modern history, except for rare protests by some Christian families against some of their sons converting to Islam. Among the famous Christian families in Gaza are "Tarzi, Khoury, Ayyad, Al-Sayegh, Al-Tawil, and Al-Sarraf". Christians in the Gaza Strip still maintain some prominent civil institutions, such as the "Young Men's Christian Association" and the "Middle East Council of Churches Association", which provide humanitarian services to Muslims and Christians alike. They also own a number of private schools, including "The Holy Family School, the Latin Patriarchate School, the Rosary Sisters School, and the Greek Orthodox School", and the majority of their students and staff are Muslims due to the small number of Christians in the Strip<sup>(4)</sup>.

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(1) Ishaq, Munther, op. cit, p.222.

(2) Interview: Saba, Issa: President of the Canaan Cultural Institute, and former President of the Young Men's Christian Association, Gaza, Palestine, 6/12/2023.

(3) The number of Christians in the Gaza Strip is fading, Sputnik Russian Agency, December 24, 2014, available at <https://2u.pw/smVq65N>.

(4) Dahman, Raba: Gaza's Christians are declining, Anadolu Agency, January 8, 2013, available at <https://bit.ly/46RGeNW>.



The continuation of the internal Palestinian crisis - represented by the continuation of the division, and the state of fragmentation and confusion that the Palestinian cause is going through - constitutes the greatest challenge facing the Christian community. The decrease in numbers during the years of division confirms the extent of the great impact on the Christian community in Gaza as a result of the continuation of the Palestinian division, the continuation of the internal Palestinian crisis, and the absence of official, partisan, and civil programs and strategies to support the Christian presence in Gaza, in light of the continued deterioration of the economic, social, and humanitarian conditions represented by the increase in poverty and unemployment rates, the scarcity of job opportunities, and the housing, marriage, and transportation crisis, which has had a dangerous impact on the Christian community.





## The second topic

### The Siege and Israeli Wars and Their Relationship to the Christian Community in Gaza

Although Israel withdrew from the Gaza Strip through the tactical withdrawal it carried out in the summer of 2005, Israel is still present in every detail of public life in the Gaza Strip. Since Hamas took control of the Strip, the occupying state has imposed a siege that sometimes intensifies and sometimes breaks, in connection with a group of factors and motives.

#### **First: The Israeli siege on Gaza and its impact on the Christian presence:**

The Israeli army has imposed a comprehensive blockade on the Gaza Strip since 2006, before Hamas took control of the Strip in 2007. The blockade came within the framework of the policy of collective punishment used by the occupation authorities against the Palestinian people in response to any military operation or event that causes the Israeli army to lose lives or equipment.

Israel has a long history of isolating the Gaza Strip, which has been subjected to numerous closures over the past two decades. However, the tight blockade that it began imposing after Hamas won the 2006 legislative elections was an unprecedented form of collective punishment, when Israel declared the Gaza Strip a “closed area” and decided to impose additional sanctions on the Hamas-run regime, imposing restrictions on the entry of fuel and the movement of citizens to and from the Strip<sup>(1)</sup>.

Gaza does not have the basics of a decent life, because the world is conspiring against it in a very strange way, and Gaza is in a state of distress and war crimes under the pretext that Hamas controls the Strip, and we will work to prosecute the leaders of the Israeli army before international courts after they committed massacres in the Gaza Strip<sup>(2)</sup>. The Israeli occupation causes many additional crises for the Christian community in Gaza. In addition to the siege and the restrictions and prevention of movement of Palestinian citizens in general, there are additional challenges imposed by the Israeli occupation on the Christian community, such as the dispersal of Christian families, the failure to issue permits for all family members to go to holy places, and the repeated attacks on Gaza that contribute to feelings

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(1) Gaza...One Hundred Thousand Hours of Isolation, Euro-Mediterranean Human Rights Centre, January 25, 2017, available at <https://2u.pw/2PheHmU>.

(2) Al-Kahlout, Osama, The number of Christians decreased from 3,500 to 1,300 in Gaza, Dunya Al-Watan, January 14, 2014, available at <https://bit.ly/3IAav9m>.

of fear and anxiety among citizens and children<sup>(1)</sup>.

Regarding the role of the Israeli occupation and its impact on the Christian community in Gaza, the results indicated that (85.97%) confirmed that the Israeli blockade is the biggest challenge facing the Christian presence in Gaza. The results also showed that (82.46%) see the repeated Israeli wars on Gaza as a threat to their lives and the lives of their families, and as a motive for emigration.

Regarding thinking about emigration in connection with the Israeli measures of siege and wars, (38.59%) reported that they are thinking about emigration very much, while (26.32%) confirmed that they are not thinking about emigration, while (12.28%) confirmed that they are not thinking about emigration at all, and (73.69%) reported that the Israeli occupation prevents the Christian community from practicing its religious rights as a result of the Israeli practices of siege and wars, and (38.59%) reported that they are thinking about emigration from Gaza but they have not found the appropriate opportunity to do so.

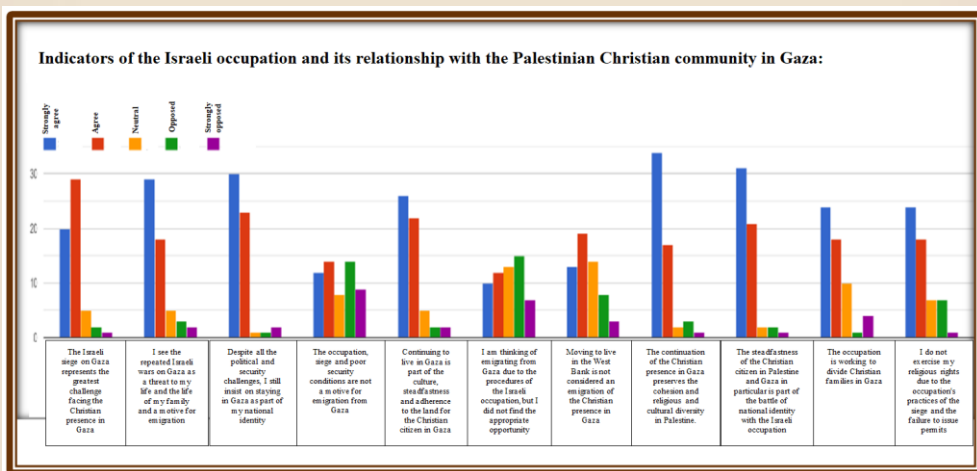


Figure (6): The sample’s opinions regarding the repercussions of the Israeli occupation and siege on the Christian community in Gaza

The difficulty of movement and travel due to the Israeli siege on Gaza, and preventing the Christian community in Gaza from reaching the holy places, especially during the holidays, are among the most common violations that the Christian community in Gaza is exposed to. The deprivation of access and family, family and religious ties pushes the Christian presence to

(1) Interview: Anton, George: Administrative Director of Caritas Jerusalem, Gaza, Palestine 7/6/2023.

permanently leave Gaza <sup>(1)</sup>. The frustration factors - due to the continuation of the Palestinian-Israeli conflict and the failure to resolve the Palestinian issue with a just and comprehensive solution - represent an additional factor for the reasons for the emigration of Christians from Palestine and Gaza in particular. The crisis of difficulty of movement, Israeli measures, and the absence of democracy, reinforce the feeling of frustration and despair, and represent a motive for emigration <sup>(2)</sup>. The continued Israeli occupation of the Palestinian territories contributes to increasing waves of migration of the Christian community in Gaza and the West Bank, because it pushes large numbers to search for a better opportunity for life outside Palestine, escaping the measures and practices of the occupation <sup>(3)</sup>.

The Israeli occupation, through its practices towards the Palestinian people and the Christian community in Gaza, contributes to the fragmentation of some families, by issuing permits to some family members and preventing others, which contributes to the dispersion of Christian families, or the refusal of some individuals to go to the holy places alone. This is what happened to me this year, as the occupation issued permits for my entire family but did not issue me a permit, which prevented the family from being united in celebrating Christmas in the West Bank <sup>(4)</sup>. Christians complain about the effects of the occupation, such as checkpoints, settler attacks, and land confiscation. They also complain about the lack of security, and a large majority of them believe that the Israeli occupation wants to expel them from their homeland. As for the internal situation, there is a complaint and great concern about the lack of security, fear of crime and theft, the absence of freedoms and the rule of law, and the spread of corruption. There is also clear concern about the presence of Salafist religious groups in Palestinian society, and the presence of armed Palestinian organizations such as Hamas and all groups that represent political Islam <sup>(5)</sup>. The Israeli occupation's measures towards the Gaza Strip, including the siege and repeated wars, pose additional challenges to the Christian community in Gaza. The occupation's practices have weakened this presence and contributed to pushing large numbers of them to leave Gaza, under the pressure of the deteriorating economic and security conditions <sup>(6)</sup>.

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(1) Interview: Tarzi, Samer, media professional and member of the Board of Directors of the Palestinian Journalists Syndicate, Gaza, Palestine, 6/6/2023.

(2) Al-Raheb, Mitri, Arab Christians, op. cit, p.106.

(3) Interview: Anton, George: op.cit.

(4) Interview: Tarzi, Sami, Project Coordinator of the Papal Mission in Gaza, Gaza, Palestine 11/7/2023.

(5) Study: Reasons for the Migration of Palestinian Christians and Ways to Reduce It, Palestinian Center for Political and Christian Research, Nablus, Palestine 2020, p.1.

(6) Interview: Darwish, Yousry, op. cit.



The Israeli occupation and its practices towards the Palestinian people in Gaza, which are based on siege, wars, oppression and assassinations, are considered among the greatest challenges facing Palestinian society and the Christian presence in Gaza in particular, as the occupation prevents citizens from moving between the governorates of the homeland, and impedes access to the holy places in Bethlehem and Jerusalem. There are many individuals and persons who are prohibited from traveling to the cities of the West Bank to attend Christmas Mass<sup>(1)</sup>.

Israel remains an occupying power under international law despite its “withdrawal” from Gaza in 2005, as it still controls the largest and most important part of the affairs of the Strip, including the movement of individuals, population registration, communication networks, land, sea and air borders, in addition to several other aspects including daily life and infrastructure, which requires it to bear responsibility for protecting the affairs of the civilian population in the Strip. But by imposing a suffocating blockade on it, Israel is violating international humanitarian law, which criminalizes the imposition of collective punishment on the entire population because of the practices of a minority of them<sup>(2)</sup>.

The Spokesman for the Secretary-General of the United Nations, Stephane Dujarric, expressed his disappointment after the Israeli occupation authorities cancelled more than 700 permits that it had previously granted to Palestinian Christians from Gaza to visit the Church of the Holy Sepulcher and holy sites on Easter. The occupation authorities had previously approved 739 Palestinian Christians permits to visit Jerusalem and perform religious rituals, but they cancelled these permits and denied all those who had previously been granted permits from visiting the holy sites. The Al Mezan Center for Human Rights condemned the denial of Christians the freedom to practice their religious rituals in continuation of the policy of racial separation and discrimination, and called on the international community to do its duty to ensure respect for the rules of international law in this region of the world. In turn, the Palestinian presidency announced on Wednesday its rejection and condemnation of the restrictions imposed on access to places of worship in the Church of the Holy Sepulcher and participation in the ceremonies of Holy Saturday<sup>(3)</sup>.

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(1) Interview: Al-Jilda, Return, op. cit.

(2) Gaza: One Hundred Thousand Hours of Isolation, Euro-Mediterranean Human Rights Centre, January 25, 2017, available at <https://2u.pw/2PheHmU>.

(3) Dujarric: Depriving Gaza Christians of visiting holy sites on Easter is disappointing, Al-Araby Al-Jadeed newspaper, April 13, 2023, available at <https://2u.pw/WJ0M7fm>.

During the holiday season at the beginning of this year 2023, the Israeli occupation issued about 500 permits out of 700 applications submitted to visit the holy sites in Jerusalem and Bethlehem; however, these permits included the names of deceased persons, children without their families, or families without their children, which leads to most of the people to whom the occupation issues permits not leaving Gaza, as a result of the occupation's policy that works to fragment the Palestinian family<sup>(1)</sup>.

The Israeli blockade of movement and access to the holy places in Bethlehem during the holiday season has pushed a large number of the Christian community in Gaza to leave and settle in the West Bank, as a compromise between a complete exit from Palestine or remaining in Gaza, in light of the many challenges facing the Christian presence in Gaza<sup>(2)</sup>. The Higher Presidential Committee for Church Affairs in Palestine called on Palestinian Christians to participate massively in Holy Saturday events despite the measures of the Israeli occupation. In a statement, the committee condemned the obstacles, restrictions and restrictions imposed by the Israeli occupation government on the Holy City as Holy Saturday and Easter approaches, stressing that freedom of worship is a right and that Palestinians do not wait for permission from anyone to practice religious rituals in mosques, churches and in their capital, occupied Jerusalem<sup>(3)</sup>. Earlier this month, the Israeli occupation authorities prevented the issuance of exit permits for nearly 200 Christians residing in Gaza, to reach the holy sites in Jerusalem and Bethlehem to participate in Christmas celebrations and perform religious rituals, amid anger at Israel's disregard for the requests of Christian citizens, who wish to occupy and meet their relatives and friends<sup>(4)</sup>.

The Israeli occupation in 1967, the Al-Aqsa Intifada in 2000, and the Israeli siege in 2007. Several reasons led to one result, which is the decrease in the number of Christians in the Gaza Strip and all of Palestine, according to church sources. The number of Christians in the Gaza Strip reached about 3,500 people out of 1,700,000 Palestinians living in the Strip. Before 1948, the percentage of Christians was (10%) of the population of all of Palestine,

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(1) Interview: Anton, Nisreen, Program Director at the Latin Monastery Church, Gaza, Palestine, August 2, 2023.

(2) Interview: Abu Dhareefa, Wajih, op. cit.

(3) "A dangerous escalation"..Palestinian rejection of the occupation's restrictions on those celebrating Holy Saturday, Al-Arabiya Channel website, April 13, 2023, available <https://bit.ly/3pXq7xs>.

(4) Israel prevents Gaza Christians from reaching holy sites in Jerusalem and Bethlehem, Al-Quds Al-Arabi newspaper, December 24, 2022, available at <https://bit.ly/44sfIJc>.

but today it does not exceed (1.3% <sup>(1)</sup>).

Hani Farah, the secretary of the YMCA in Gaza, used to go to the Church of the Nativity in Bethlehem every year to celebrate Christmas and light the Christmas tree. However, this year he was unable to leave after the Israeli authorities refused to grant him an entry permit and allowed some of his family members to enter, without giving any convincing reasons for preventing him<sup>(2)</sup>. This confirms the arbitrariness of the occupation authorities towards the Christian community in Gaza, and their attempts to divide Christian families during the holiday seasons, as the Civil Administration does not issue permits to the entire family, for fear of settling in the West Bank.

Father Manuel Musallam confirms: The occupation does not differentiate between an Eastern Christian and a Western one, because they are not concerned with this distinction; but they are interested in distinguishing between a Muslim and a Christian. Israel previously announced that it gives permits to Christians to create confusion between Muslims and Christians, and because they are persecuted in Gaza because dozens of young Muslims are chasing them in Gaza. "The evidence for this is that on 12/25/2014, the priest who is in Gaza issued permits for Christian and Muslim teachers in the school to visit Bethlehem to attend the holidays in order to go out together, so Israel granted permits to Christians and did not give any Muslim woman a permit, and this is for the sake of distinction, as if we are the weak side in Gaza," according to what the father said<sup>(3)</sup>.

Like the Muslims of Gaza, these Christians are cut off from the rest of the world, including the holy sites in the West Bank. Every year, Christians in Gaza ask the Israeli military for permission to join Easter Mass in Jerusalem and Bethlehem. Only 200 Christians are granted permits; but only if they are at least 55 years old and are not allowed to travel to Jerusalem.

The Israeli human rights organization Gisha called the Israeli military's decision "another violation of the basic rights of Palestinians to freedom of movement, freedom of religion and family life," and rightly accused Israel of wanting to "deepen the separation" between Gaza and the West Bank. Israel aims to do more than that by separating Palestinian Christians from

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(1) Dahman, Raba: Gaza's Christians are declining, Anadolu Agency, January 8, 2013, available at <https://bit.ly/46RGeNW>.

(2) Israel prevents Gaza Christians from reaching holy sites in Jerusalem and Bethlehem, Al-Quds Al-Arabi newspaper, December 24, 2022, available at <https://bit.ly/44sfIJc>

(3) Report: The number of Christians decreased from 3,500 to 1,300 in Gaza, Dunya Al Watan, January 14, 2014, available at <https://bit.ly/3IAav9m>

each other and from their holy sites (as in the case of Muslims), the Israeli government hopes to weaken the social, cultural and spiritual ties that give Palestinians their collective identity<sup>(1)</sup>.

The Israeli occupation prevents the Christians of Gaza from reaching the holy places in Bethlehem and Jerusalem during the Christian holidays. It is customary for the occupation to issue a small number of permits for one or two members of the family and prevent the rest. This leads to the remaining members of the family refraining from going to the West Bank to spend the holidays and attend Christmas Eve Mass.

Al Mezan Center for Human Rights condemned the denial of Christians the freedom to practice their religious rituals in continuation of the policy of racial segregation and discrimination, and called on the international community to do its duty to ensure respect for the rules of international law in this region of the world. According to the information available to the center, approximately 1,000 Christians from among those residing in the Gaza Strip submitted applications to the Israeli occupation authorities before the beginning of 2023 to obtain a permit that would enable them to reach the city of Jerusalem to practice their religious rituals in celebration of Easter. The occupation authorities approved 739 of these applications, only to announce later the cancellation of the approvals and the complete deprivation of everyone from accessing the holy sites and practicing their religious rituals<sup>(2)</sup>.

The siege imposed on the Gaza Strip by the Israeli occupation certainly had a major impact on Palestinian society in general, and the Christian presence in particular, as Israel prevents many individuals from going to the West Bank to attend Christmas Mass. Israeli policies also contribute to the dispersion of Christian families in Gaza, through the policy of preventing some family members<sup>(3)</sup>.

Israel's strategy is based on the idea that a combination of factors - massive economic hardship, permanent blockade, apartheid, and the breakdown of community and spiritual ties - will eventually drive all Christians from their homeland of Palestine.

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(1) Ramzy Baroud. Israël veut faire disparaître la communauté chrétienne de Palestine., *chroniquepalestine*, 31 octobre 2019. <https://bit.ly/3CcHBJ3>

(2) Al Mezan Center condemns the occupation authorities' denial of Christians in Gaza from visiting holy sites on Easter, Gaza, Palestine, April 11, 2023, available at <https://bit.ly/43yp3ij>.

(3) Interview: Younis, Issam, Director of Al Mezan Center for Human Rights, Gaza, Palestine, 7/23/2023.

Israel is keen to portray the “conflict” in Palestine as a religious one so that it can portray itself as a Jewish state besieged by the largely Muslim population of the Middle East. Equally troubling is that Israel’s most ardent supporters—in the United States and elsewhere—are devout Christians.<sup>(1)</sup> The decline in the number of Christians in the Gaza Strip is due to a number of reasons, the most prominent of which is the prevailing conditions in the Gaza Strip. 104 Christians changed their place of residence from Gaza after 2007, and a large number of them left the Gaza Strip to the West Bank, then the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan, or to Egypt to study and work, and then to European countries. The life of Christians in the Gaza Strip is not much different from the life of Muslims who have suffered from the difficulties of the economic situation due to the worsening siege imposed on the Gaza Strip for more than 17 years. The life of Christians is characterized by luxury, openness and recreation, which has become difficult for them in light of the worsening political situation since 2007. One of the reasons for migration is the increasing desire of Christian students - among a group of them - to complete their studies that are compatible with their faith and sciences abroad, as they are not available<sup>(2)</sup> of the Gaza Strip<sup>(2)</sup>.

The continued denial of Christians from the Gaza Strip from accessing the holy sites in the cities of Jerusalem and Bethlehem, in a continuation of the violations of the rights of Palestinians, Muslims and Christians, to freedom of worship, and their inherent right to practice their religious rituals, has always been condemned by human rights centers. Al Mezan Center condemns in the strongest terms the continued blockade imposed on the Gaza Strip as part of the crime of apartheid and racial discrimination, and its continuation as collective punishment of the population, and denounces the denial of Palestinian Christians from their right to worship and practice their religious rituals<sup>(3)</sup>.

“Because of the occupation and the pressures, every day the country’s youth leave to build a future elsewhere; this is my fear,” says Naila, a Christian in her 60s. “Soon, there will be only churches, but without believers and without baptism; in short, churches of silence and dead stones.” Nora Karmi, born in Jerusalem in 1947 and a “peaceful and determined resistance

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(1) Ramzy Baroud. Israël veut faire disparaître la communauté chrétienne de Palestine., *chroniquepalestine*, 31 octobre 2019. <https://bit.ly/3CcHBJ3>.

(2) Al-Jadba, Fawzi: Op. cit, p.37.

(3) Al Mezan Center condemns the occupation authorities’ denial of Christians in Gaza from visiting holy sites on Easter, Gaza, Palestine, April 11, 2023, available at <https://bit.ly/43yp3ij>.

to the Israeli occupation,” is not worried. “We have been here for more than 2,000 years,” she says. “With our history, our churches, our schools, our universities, our hospitals, our social services, we participate greatly in the life of the country and struggle to build a just society where non-Jews are not treated as second-class citizens. This is the reason for the struggle that I wage with love, but with determination”<sup>(1)</sup>.

### **Second: The repeated Israeli wars on Gaza and their repercussions on the Christian community:**

Arab Christianity has its roots deep in time. On the first day of the emergence of Christianity in Jerusalem, we find mention of the Arabs among the peoples - in the Book of Acts - that made up the first Christian community (see Acts 2:10). Over the next six centuries, Arab Christianity spread throughout the Levant, Mesopotamia, and the Arabian Peninsula<sup>(2)</sup>.

Since the Palestinian division, Israel has turned the Gaza Strip into an open and permanent battlefield, using it to test new Israeli weapons, an arena to relieve internal political pressure, and an arena for political and military maneuvering whenever circumstances permit, exploiting the presence of Hamas in power and some resistance forces to justify its repeated aggression against Gaza.

The repeated wars waged by Israel on Gaza have contributed to the consolidation of the Palestinian division and the confirmation of the existence of a separate entity in Gaza that Israel considers a hostile entity. If we examine the Israeli wars on Gaza, we will find that they came in the context of internal Israeli political crises that Israeli governments suffered from in order to escape their multiple dilemmas, and out of keenness to consecrate the division, increase Gaza's suffering, and destroy the national project. The Israeli wars did not go beyond the context of creating the state of Gaza and consecrating Gaza's separation from Palestinian political geography, since these wars were taking place between Gaza and the Israeli army in light of the absence of the West Bank from the scene on the field and political levels. In light of the conclusion of truce agreements between Hamas and Israel, the Palestinian Authority and the PLO were absent from the framework of the war equation<sup>(3)</sup>.

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(1) Balbont pour cath.Israël-Palestine: des chrétiens dans la guerre, cath.ch, 19 may 2021.<https://bit.ly/421x1Pj>

(2) Khoury, Rafiq: The Role of Christian Arabs in the National Movement, op. cit.

(3) Ibrash, Ibrahim, The War on Gaza: The Future of the National Project (War as One of the Mechanisms for Creating the State of Gaza), Siyasat Magazine, Issue 30, Palestinian Policy Institute, Ramallah, Palestine, 2014, pp.21-22.

Every time Israel claims that its wars on Gaza do not target the Palestinian people, but rather aim to eliminate the rule of the “terrorist” Hamas movement, or weaken it, or punish it for firing rockets, from the logic of self-defense, while focusing on the Hamas presence in Gaza with terms and vocabulary such as Hamas rockets, Hamas rule, and Hamas agreement, with the aim of misleading world public opinion and achieving two things: the first is to destroy Gaza without international opposition, since Hamas is classified as a “terrorist” movement, and the second is to divert attention from what is happening in the West Bank in terms of settlement and Judaization of Jerusalem<sup>(1)</sup>.

Since the beginning of the Israeli occupation of the Palestinian territories, Israel has been working to push the Christian presence in Palestine to emigrate and leave the Palestinian territories, for various reasons: the most important of which is trying to portray the conflict as a conflict between Muslims and Jews only, and isolating the Christian community from its national environment. During the Intifada, the Christian presence decreased due to the practices of the occupation, and the repeated Israeli wars and aggression on Gaza contributed to pushing many members of the Christian community to leave Gaza<sup>(2)</sup>.

The Israeli occupation does not differentiate between the Palestinian Muslim and Christian citizen, as everyone is targeted. Father Gabriele Romanelli, the pastor of the Catholic Church of the Holy Family for two years, described the scenes of distress, saying: “Many of our homes have been bombed, and families have been forced to flee to take refuge in the three schools we own. This is the war we have been living since 2014. I notice with pain that our community is shrinking every year. When I came here for my mission 15 years ago, Gaza was <sup>(3)</sup>3,500 Christians. Today there are 1,077 remaining, including 133 Catholics”<sup>(4)</sup>.

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(1) Salama, Abdul Ghani, *The War on Gaza, Its Motives and Implications for the Future of the Palestinian Cause*, Siyasat Magazine, Issue 30, Public Policy Institute, Ramallah, Palestine, 2014, p.54.

(2) Interview: Tarzi, Samer, media professional and member of the Board of Directors of the Palestinian Journalists Syndicate, Gaza, Palestine, 6/6/2023.

(3) It should be noted that this number is exaggerated, and was reported by more than one Christian religious official, including Father Manuel Muslim. However, the most accurate estimates are that the number of members of the Christian community in Gaza, according to the 2007 census, was approximately 1,400 people.

(4) Balbont pour cath.Israël-Palestine: des chrétiens dans la guerre, cath.ch, 19 may 2021.<https://bit.ly/421x1Pj>.

During the 2014 aggression, the Christian community in Gaza lost a martyr as a result of the bombing, when Israeli warplanes bombed the house of the Ayyad family in Gaza City. The incident resulted in the martyrdom of (Jalila Ayyad, Umm Jirjis), and the serious injury of her son. This incident led to my uncle's family leaving the Strip and settling in the West Bank<sup>(1)</sup>.

The many wars and security, political and economic pressures have contributed to pushing a large number of members of the Christian community to leave Gaza, due to various reasons. There is internal migration towards the cities of the West Bank, and there is external migration towards Europe and America. This has led to a decline in the numbers of the Christian community in Gaza until it reached approximately 1,029 people, and it is subject to decline as a result of these challenges<sup>(2)</sup>.

Son Manuel Muslim believes that: The number of Christians in Gaza decreased as a result of the occupation from 3,500 Christians to 1,300 Christians in 2014, due to leaving the Strip to settle in Europe and study in Jordan and Egypt. The life of Christians is not different from that of Muslims in Gaza and there is no luxury in it; rather, things are bad as a result of the Israeli wars and the siege imposed on Gaza<sup>(3)</sup>.

In an article published in May 2021, journalist Luc Balbont discussed the suffering of Palestinian Christians during the aggression launched by Israel that month on the Gaza Strip. He cited what was stated by the young father (Firas Abd Rabbo), secretary of Bishop (Pier Battista Pizzaballa), the Latin Bishop of Jerusalem, who said:

“We live this war like our Muslim compatriots in fear, with a deep sense that this world has abandoned us,” and that “the victims are described as terrorists and the occupier as the victim.” He also quoted what Father Gabriele Romanelli, pastor of the Catholic Church of the Holy Family, told him in a phone call: “Many of our homes have been bombed, and families have had to flee to take refuge in our three schools; this is the third war we have witnessed since 2014, and I note with concern that our community is shrinking every year.” Father Manuel Musallam, when asked about the

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(1) Interview: Ayyad, Kamel: Public Relations Manager at St.Porphyrus Church, Gaza, Palestine, 6/18/2023.

(2) Interview: Ayyad, Kamel: The op. cit.

(3) Report: The number of Christians decreased from 3,500 to 1,300 in Gaza, *Dunya Al Watan*, January 14, 2014, available at <https://bit.ly/3IAav9m>.



future of these Christians in Gaza, replied sadly that “every year he sees families worried about their children, for whom there is no future and so they emigrate. It is truly heartbreaking, because the Christian presence in Gaza plays a fundamental role in preserving diversity and internal peace”<sup>(1)</sup>.

The results of the study by the Palestinian Center for Political and Christian Studies confirm that the circumstances of the Palestinian-Israeli conflict are pushing them to think about leaving. For example, Christians complain about the effects of Israeli checkpoints, settler attacks, and land confiscation. They also complain about the lack of security, and a large majority of them believe that Israel wants to expel them from their homeland<sup>(2)</sup>. Father Manuel Musallam sees no salvation from the occupation except by adhering to the Palestinian land and our right to Palestine, which he likes to call the Holy Land. He believes that the message of national unity and adherence to the constants between Fatah and Hamas and between the factions of the Palestine Liberation Organization is the only way to get rid of the Israeli occupation<sup>(3)</sup>.

A study conducted by Dar al-Kalima University in Beit Jala in the West Bank and published in December 2017 included nearly 1,000 Palestinians, half of them Christians and the rest Muslims. One of the main objectives of this research was to understand why the Christian population is gradually disappearing from Palestine. The study concluded that “the pressure of the Israeli occupation, permanent restrictions, discriminatory policies, arbitrary arrests, and land confiscation have made a general feeling of hopelessness the dominant characteristic among Palestinian Christians,” who find themselves in “a desperate situation where they can no longer see any future for their children or for themselves.”<sup>(4)</sup> The most optimistic estimates put the total number of Palestinian Christians out of the total population of occupied Palestine at less than 1%. The connection between the declining Christian population in Palestine and the Israeli occupation and the apartheid regime that Israel has established in the Palestinian territories is undeniable.

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(1) Al-Sharif, Maher, *Palestinian Christians: Partners in Suffering, Partners in National Construction*, Institute for Palestine Studies, May 9, 2022, available at <https://bit.ly/3MyViq7>.

(2) *Reasons for the migration of Palestinian Christians and ways to reduce it*, the Palestinian Center for Political and Christian Research.

(3) Draghmeh, Ayman, *op. cit.*, p.5.

(4) Ramzy Baroud, *Israël veut faire disparaître la communauté chrétienne de Palestine*, *chroniquepalestine*, 31 octobre 2019. <https://bit.ly/3CcHBJ3>

More than half of Christians want a political solution to the conflict with Israel that leads to the establishment of a single state with equal rights and duties for Palestinians and Israelis. While three in ten say they prefer a two-state solution, half of Christians see a one-state solution as the safest for them in Palestine<sup>(1)</sup>. But despite all the political, security and economic challenges imposed by the Israeli occupation, we find that many Christians in Gaza are determined to stay and continue on this land. “I will not leave Gaza except by returning to Majdal,” said Elias Al-Jilda, who belongs to a Christian refugee family from the city of Majdal inside occupied Palestine before the Nakba of 1948. He said, “The Palestinian Christian is an integral part of this holy land, and I do not see myself except in my homeland, despite all the pain resulting from the Israeli occupation and the crimes committed against us all as Palestinian Muslims and Christians.” “This land is ours, and no matter how criminal Israel is, we will not leave. We are ready to pay any price for freedom and to regain our homeland. History records that Palestinian Christians participated in the national struggle and presented martyrs, wounded and prisoners over the years”<sup>(2)</sup>.

The internal Palestinian political situation has imposed major challenges on the Christian community in Gaza. These conditions have pushed large numbers to leave Gaza in light of the ongoing division and the absence of real democratic practice resulting from the failure of the Palestinian political forces to find a real way out of the internal crisis by ending the division and restoring unity. In addition, there are challenges imposed by the Israeli occupation on the Christian community in Gaza, which create major difficulties, as the division and the Israeli occupation are considered among the most important factors repelling the Christian presence in Gaza. The sharp decline in the number of Christians has become very prominent during the years of division, and the wars, sieges, closures, and restrictions on the movement of individuals and goods through the crossings.

In short, the internal Palestinian situation, the ongoing division, the siege, and the repeated Israeli wars on Gaza have created an environment that repels the Christian presence from Gaza, and together they have posed the

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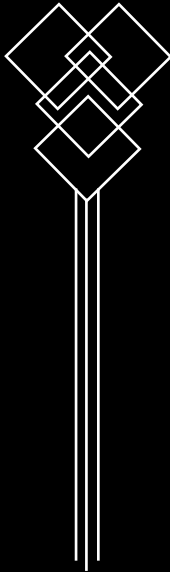
(1) Study: Reasons for the migration of Palestinian Christians and ways to reduce it, Palestinian Center for Political and Christian Research, Nablus, Palestine 2020 AD, p.3.

(2) Musa, Raed: “The occupation’s lava does not differentiate between one Palestinian and another.” Gaza Christians insist on staying there despite Israeli crimes against them, Al Jazeera Net, July 4, 2021, available at <https://bit.ly/3rr7Fhb>.



greatest challenge to the survival of this presence at the individual and institutional level, which may lead to a further decrease in numbers in the coming years if these challenges continue, and if specific policies and interventions are not adopted that contribute to strengthening this presence.





## **CHAPTER FIVE**

# **ECONOMIC AND SOCIAL CONDITIONS AND THEIR IMPACT ON THE CHRISTIAN PRESENCE IN GAZA**

**The first topic: Economic conditions and their relationship to the migration of the Christian presence from Palestine**

**The second topic: Social conditions and their relationship to the Christian presence in Gaza**





## **Chapter Five**

### **Economic and Social Conditions and Their Impact on the Christian Presence in Gaza**

The economy always plays an important role in the lives of people, especially since a stable economy represents the locomotive that drives the wheel of progress and sustainable development in countries. Stable economic and social conditions also contribute to strengthening the national fabric and civil peace, and help reduce migration, especially among young people..

Israel has always used the economic card to exert pressure on the Palestinian people, and push them to make concessions, or push them to leave the Palestinian land, within the framework of the policy of collective punishment used by the Israeli occupation forces against the Palestinian people in all places where they are present.

In this chapter, the study will review the economic and social factors, their impact on the Christian community in Palestine and the Gaza Strip in particular, and their role in pushing Christian citizens to emigrate in search of better opportunities.

## The first topic

### Economic conditions and their relationship to the migration of the Christian presence from Palestine

The deteriorating economic situation in Gaza has added major challenges to the Palestinian people, especially the youth, and has prompted a large number of them to think seriously about emigration. Estimates indicate that 340,000 citizens have left Gaza in search of a job opportunity and a better life as a result of the ongoing division and siege.

There is no doubt that the level of national and individual income, the availability of suitable job opportunities, and the provision of good health and educational services will contribute to the stability of the political situation, reduce immigration and crime, and contribute to maintaining civil peace and coexistence among all segments of society.

#### **First: The migration of Christians from Palestine in the general context:**

Palestinian Christians are considered the oldest Christian community in the world, so they are called the "first Christians" because they were the first to enter the Christian religion, as they were described by Peter I in his letters. Despite their relatively limited numbers in Palestine, Christians here follow several sects, as more than half of the Christians in the Palestinian territories follow the Greek Orthodox Church, representing about (51%) of Christians in the West Bank, the Gaza Strip and inside the Green Line, while the rest are distributed among the various churches, Latins (Catholics) (30%), Greek Catholics (6%), Protestants (5%), Syriacs (3%), and the percentage of each of the Copts, Ethiopians, Armenians and other Christians is about (2%)<sup>(1)</sup>.

One of the main issues highlighted in the various meetings is the rapid decline in the number of Palestinian Christians in Palestine. There are varying estimates of the number of Palestinian Christians still living in Palestine today, compared to the period before 1948, when the State of Israel took over the ruins of Palestinian cities and villages. Regardless of the sources of the various studies, there is a near consensus that the Christian population in Palestine has declined by about 10 times over the past 70 years<sup>(2)</sup>.

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(1) Christians in Gaza – Sounding the Alarm, Phenix Center for Human Rights in the Middle East and North Africa, April 29, 2016, available at <https://2u.pw/r0nwJof>.

(2) Ramzy Baroud, Israël veut faire disparaître la communauté chrétienne de Palestine, ChroniquePalestine.com, 2019, <https://bit.ly/45VATUn>

Palestinian Christians are always worried about the circumstances surrounding them, whether economic, political or security, which prompts a number of them to think about emigrating and leaving their homeland in search of stability, security and equality. This fact was revealed by a poll conducted by the Palestinian Center for Policy and Survey Research between January 27 and February 23, 2020. The results show that Christians want to emigrate more than Palestinian Muslims want to do the same<sup>(1)</sup>.

Palestinian Christians live in a number of West Bank cities, such as Bethlehem, Ramallah, Nablus, and Jericho, as well as in the Gaza Strip. Official figures from 2017 indicate that their number reaches about 47,000 people out of about four million Palestinians living in the West Bank and two million in the Gaza Strip. The Christian presence in the West Bank has declined significantly over the past hundred years, as their percentage in the city of Bethlehem, for example, which has a Christian character and contains the Church of the Nativity, fell from (84%) of the total population in 1922 to (28%) in 2007<sup>(2)</sup>.

It is noteworthy that the majority of Christians were and still are living in Palestinian cities rather than in the countryside. They are usually craftsmen and belong to the middle class. Historically, Christians were associated with the craftsmen class, as most of them were manual craftsmen. This is clearly confirmed by the Arabic names of Christian families (blacksmith, goldsmith, tailor) and other names. There have been fundamental changes in the class factor of Christians in Palestine, especially after the arrival of missionary missions. After the establishment of many schools, colleges and universities, the Christian community turned to studying medicine and engineering<sup>(3)</sup>.

Historically, the rate of emigration of Palestinian Christians was higher than that of Muslims. With the end of the Ottoman rule in Palestine and the beginning of the British Mandate in 1922, Christians constituted 11% of the population of all of Palestine, with a number of 70,429 individuals. However, this percentage declined with the end of the Mandate to 8% in 1946, despite their number increasing to 145,063.34,000 people, or 2.9% of the total population of Israel. In 1949, the number of Christians in the West

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(1) A survey reveals the state of Palestinian Christians..a desire to emigrate in search of safety and equality, Alhurra Channel website, Washington, June 8, 2020, available <https://2u.pw/Z81Jms3>.

(2) A survey reveals the state of Palestinian Christians..a desire to emigrate in search of security and equality, op. cit.

(3) Al-Raheb, Metri, Arab Christians, op. cit, p.103.



Bank reached 51,063 people, and their number in the 1961 census - conducted by the Jordanian government - reached 45,855<sup>(1)</sup>.

When the Israeli occupation of the West Bank and Gaza Strip began in 1967, the percentage of Christians in these occupied areas reached (6%) and their number was 42,719. When the first official Palestinian census was conducted in 1997 - four years after the establishment of the Palestinian Authority - the number of Palestinian Christians reached 40,055 and their percentage was only 1.5. As for the second census in 2007, their number was 42,565 and their percentage was 1.2; while the third census - in 2017 - witnessed an increase in their number to reach 46,850 with a decrease in their percentage to reach only (1%)<sup>(2)</sup>.

The demographic crisis that has affected the Christian community for decades is spiraling out of control. For example, 70 years ago, Bethlehem, the birthplace of Jesus, was 86% Christian. But the city's demographics have changed dramatically, especially after the Israeli occupation of the West Bank in June 1967 and the construction of the illegal Israeli apartheid wall that began in 2002. Part of the wall aims to isolate Bethlehem from Jerusalem and the rest of the West Bank<sup>(3)</sup>.

The migration of Palestinians from their land goes back to a long tradition that crystallized at the end of the nineteenth century, and was subject to economic reasons in the first place. If this phenomenon of migration is more noticeable among Palestinian Christians, it is perhaps due to the high level of education, linguistic diversity, and the spirit of initiative that distinguishes them<sup>(4)</sup>.

Political reasons have always been the main factor in the migration of Christians from Palestine. The Palestinian Nakba in 1948, followed by the Israeli occupation of the West Bank, Jerusalem and the Gaza Strip, caused the migration of about 50,000 Palestinian Christians, or about 35% of the Christians who lived in Mandatory Palestine. While the years of the first Intifada witnessed the migration of a number of Christian university graduates who were denied economic prospects, the years following the Oslo Accords witnessed the return of a large number of Christian

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(1) Reasons for the migration of Palestinian Christians and ways to reduce it, Palestinian Center for Political and Christian Research, Ramallah, Palestine 2020, p.2.

(2) Reasons for the migration of Palestinian Christians and ways to reduce it, op. cit, p.2.

(3) Ramzy Baroud, Israël veut faire disparaître la communauté chrétienne de Palestine, ChroniquePalestine.com, 2019, <https://bit.ly/45VATUn>

(4) Al-Sharif, Maher, Palestinian Christians: Partners in Suffering, Partners in National Construction, Institute for Palestine Studies, Beirut, 2020.

intellectuals and businessmen to their homeland. Then the migration movement resumed during the years of the second Intifada<sup>(1)</sup>.

Estimates indicate that the number of Palestinian Christians reaches 2.3 million people, the absolute majority of whom reside outside Palestine. Therefore, the percentage of Christians in the Palestinian territories does not exceed (1%), after they constituted approximately (11.2%) before the Nakba of 1948. The main reason for this decline is immigration, as 45,000 Christians lived in the territories occupied since 1967, distributed between the West Bank, which is inhabited by 40,000, the Gaza Strip, which is inhabited by approximately 1,000 Christians, and Jerusalem, which includes less than 4,000 of them, while the latest estimates show that their percentage does not exceed (0.60%) of the total citizens in the Palestinian territories<sup>(2)</sup>.

(Hanna Issa), the former Secretary-General of the Islamic Christian Authority for the Care of Holy Sites, confirmed that the number of Christians in the territories occupied in 1967 has decreased by 50% since 2000, explaining that their number was estimated in 2000 at about 2% of the population, but today it has declined to only about 1%. Historically, the number of Christians began to decline significantly since the Nakba in 1948, when their percentage was 8% of the total population, while it is now estimated at about 46,000 in the territories occupied in 1967, and about 110,000 in the territories occupied in 1948, indicating that the number of Christians in Jerusalem has declined from 27,000 people in 1947 to about five thousand Christians today<sup>(3)</sup>. Some Palestinian cities in the West Bank with a Christian character have witnessed a significant decline in their percentage over the past hundred years. For example, the percentage of Christians in the city of Bethlehem declined from (84%) in 1922 to (28%) in 2007, in Beit Jala from (99%) to (61%), and in Beit Sahour from (81%) to (65%) during the same period<sup>(4)</sup>.

The minority complex contributes to increasing the intensity of the waves of Christian emigration from Palestine, since Christians in Palestine are a numerical minority and not a qualitative minority. Minorities are often more

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(1) Al-Sharif, Maher, Palestinian Christians: Partners in Suffering, Partners in National Construction, Institute for Palestine Studies, May 9, 2022.

(2) Israel has prevented them from reaching the Church of the Holy Sepulchre. Who are the Christians of Palestine? Al Jazeera Net, April 24, 2022, available at <https://2u.pw/iZpKy3>.

(3) The migration of half of Palestine's Christians, Al Jazeera Net, Doha 2013, available at <https://bit.ly/41PRt5v>.

(4) Reasons for the migration of Palestinian Christians and ways to reduce it, op. cit, p.3.

threatened by emigration than others for several reasons.<sup>(1)</sup>:

1. The minority complex that we find in the psychology of minorities, which is linked to the fear of dissolution and disintegration; and sometimes even the threat from the majority.
2. The absence of a comprehensive democratic system that preserves pluralism in the countries of the Middle East, which guarantees the rights of citizenship for the individual and the group, regardless of the individual's religious beliefs and his party and ideological affiliation.
3. The individual is still not known for his human affiliation, but rather tends towards party and political affiliation, and these affiliations have economic repercussions (such as the distribution of positions and wealth), political repercussions (such as the dominance of a single party over power), and psychological repercussions (such as the feeling of persecution and alienation).

In Palestine, the Israeli occupation's policy towards Palestinians, especially Christians, is considered a major reason for their migration. Their numbers have declined significantly in the past forty years. The decline in their numbers was evident in Christian or mixed cities and villages such as Jerusalem, Bethlehem, and Ramallah. Some of them initially headed to Arab countries for work, study, or temporary residence; however, many of them later left for Western countries, many of which encouraged Christian migration to them, as part of a settlement process that represents one aspect of a political solution to the Palestinian conflict with Israel<sup>(2)</sup>.

Arab Christians face many challenges that ultimately face Arab society as a whole; however, there are challenges that are of particular importance, namely those related to emigration and the declining numbers of Palestinian and Arab Christians in the Holy Land. Emigration from the country leads to a decrease in numbers and a change in the dynamics of relations within the Church itself, in its relations with other churches, and with the larger society as a whole.

However, the decline in the number of Christians is not only due to migration, but also to the demographic transition process, which is characterized by low birth rates among Arab Christians in general, compared to the rest of the population as a whole. Estimates of Arab

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(1) Al-Raheb, Metri, Arab Christians, op. cit, p.106.

(2) Christians in Gaza – Sounding the Alarm, Phenix Center for Human Rights in the Middle East and North Africa, April 29, 2016, available at <https://2u.pw/r0nwJof>.

Christians living abroad reach three million, or between (31%) and (22.6%) of the estimated number of Arab Christians in the Arab world today. These figures and data indicate the existence of a strong migration trend among Arab Christians in the Arab East<sup>(1)</sup>.

Several factors contributed to pushing Christian Arabs to emigrate from Palestine, the most important of which were the security disturbances caused by the Arab-Israeli conflict, the establishment of Israel and the Nakba of the Palestinian people in 1948, the continuation of massacres against the Palestinian people, the Israeli occupation of the West Bank and the Gaza Strip in 1967, the outbreak of the Intifada of the Stones in 1987 and the Al-Aqsa Intifada in 2000, and the resulting security and political disturbances, not to mention the policy of land confiscation and the erection of barriers that have become a burden on the Palestinian citizen.

**Second: The migration of the Christian community from the Gaza Strip:**

The Gaza Strip suffers from many challenges related to poor economic and social conditions, and high rates of poverty and unemployment - especially among young people - as many indicators have shown the existence of many challenges suffered by Palestinian youth in the Strip, which prompts large numbers of them to think about immigration and search for individual salvation, in light of the ongoing internal Palestinian crisis.

There is no doubt that the continuation of the division crisis, the Israeli siege, and the deterioration of living conditions in the Gaza Strip constitute a fertile environment for pushing young people to emigrate - especially for political reasons - and this was indicated by the Palestinian Youth Survey of 2015, as about (7.5%) of young people attribute their desire to emigrate to political and security conditions in the country. While (2.7%) of young people attribute their desire to emigrate to the occupation, and about (0.5%) of their emigration was due to obtaining political asylum<sup>(2)</sup>. The continued political division between the West Bank and the Gaza Strip cannot be ignored, as it has cast a heavy shadow over the economic and social conditions in the Palestinian territories - especially in the Gaza Strip - which has resulted in massive damage to the already exhausted infrastructure of the Gaza Strip, and the destruction of its production base, leaving no room for economic recovery and revival. It has also led to the impoverishment of

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(1) Issa, Hanna: Christians in Palestine and Jerusalem, Al Jazeera Net, May 1, 2016, available at <https://2u.pw/LOnQzzB>.

(2) Palestinian Central Bureau of Statistics, Labor Force Survey 2015, Ramallah, 2016, p.89.

the Palestinian population in Gaza, and made their economic situation worse than it was for the previous two decades<sup>(1)</sup>.

The migration from Palestine led to a significant decrease in the number of Christians, and a change in the dynamics of relations within the church itself, and in its relations with other churches, and with society as a whole. The reason is not only due to migration, but also to the decline in the birth rate among Christians due to their high economic and social level, and their feeling, along with other social groups, of the futility of remaining due to the deterioration of the economic and political conditions in the Palestinian territories<sup>(2)</sup>.

When Israel occupied Gaza along with the rest of historic Palestine in 1967, there were about 2,300 Christians living in the Gaza Strip. Today, only 1,100 remain. Years of occupation, terrible wars and a merciless siege have taken their toll on a community whose historical roots date back two millennia<sup>(3)</sup>.

Since the first Intifada (1987), the motivation for leaving has been the lack of economic prospects for graduates who enjoyed a good standard of living. With the exception of the Oslo period, which saw the return of intellectuals and businessmen, emigration resumed with the second Intifada (September 2000). It should be noted that this affects wealthy families and/or those with a family network abroad, but also students who cannot continue their studies locally. The increasing Israeli military blockade has made access to Palestinian universities more difficult, as admission to Israeli universities for potential applicants is subject to numerous restrictions<sup>(4)</sup>.

The 1997 General Population, Housing and Establishments Census represents the first reference for documenting the number and distribution of Christians in the Gaza Strip, whose number was estimated at 1,688 individuals, followed by the second national census in 2007, which showed a decline in the number of Christians in the Gaza Strip to 1,375 individuals<sup>(5)</sup>.

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(1) Raed Halas, *The Migration of Palestinian Youth and Its Economic Implications*, Palestinian Affairs Magazine, Issue 265, 2016, p.123.

(2) Atma, Raghda: *Their percentage is less than 1 percent...Where did the Christians of Palestine go?*, Independent Arabia, October 12, 2019, <https://2u.pw/wPgFKpn>.

(3) Ramzy Baroud, *Israël veut faire disparaître la communauté chrétienne de Palestine*, ChroniquePalestine.com, 2019, <https://bit.ly/45VATUn>

(4) Sossie, Andezian, *Christian Palestinians and national construction*, *Confluences Méditerranée* 2008, p 62.

(5) Murad, Rami, and others: *Op. cit*, p.15.

The results of the survey conducted by the YMCA in Gaza in 2014 show that the number of Christian families in the Gaza Strip in that year was 390 families, with a total of 1,313 individuals (636 males and 677 females), of whom 1,266 individuals were in the Gaza Strip, and 47 individuals were outside the Strip (38 students and 9 individuals for purposes other than study). It is noticeable that there is a decrease in the number of Christians in the Gaza Strip, as their number was 1,688 individuals in 1997, and 1,375 individuals in 2007, to become 1,313 in March 2014, i.e. a general decrease rate (1.3%) annually from 1997 to 2014. The average size of a Christian family was 3.8 individuals, with an average housing density of 0.9 individuals/room, thus their housing is not crowded <sup>(1)</sup>. The Christian community in Gaza is now estimated at 1,028 people, distributed among 350 families <sup>(2)</sup>. There are other estimates that the Christian community in Gaza is less than 1,000 citizens. Some opinions confirm that the Christian community in Gaza does not exceed 850 people, most of whom are women, elderly men, children and young people, who are unable to emigrate.

The decline in the increase in Christian emigration among young people, the weakness of the natural population growth among Christians compared to Muslims, and the rise in the age of marriage among them is not only in the Gaza Strip, but has extended to cities with a Christian character such as the city of Bethlehem, where the percentage of Christians was (84%) in 1922 AD, to reach about (28%) in 2007 AD, while Beit Jala was (99%), and declined to about (6%), and Beit Sahour from about (81%) to about (65%) only <sup>(3)</sup>. During the study period, the Christian community in Gaza lost two members of the community due to death, and lost two families due to migration (the Orthodox (S) family, and the Baptist (F) family), which indicates that the Christian community in Gaza is decreasing either as a result of migration to escape the challenges of the political, security and economic reality, or due to natural deaths that occur in any community..

Regarding the reasons for the increase in waves of migration from the Christian community in Gaza, the results confirmed that the deteriorating economic situation was the biggest motive for migration, as (59.6%) reported that the economic situation was the direct reason for migration, in addition to the political and security situation, which came in second place

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(1) Murad, Rami, and others: Op. cit, p.8.

(2) Interview: Ayyad, Kamel: Public Relations Manager at St.Porphyrus Church, Gaza, Palestine, 6/18/2023.

(3) Palestinian Center for Policy and Survey Research, Reasons for the Migration of Palestinian Christians and Ways to Reduce It, Christian Research Unit, June 8, 2020, p.2.

with a percentage of (52.6%), while the Israeli wars on the Gaza Strip came in third place with a percentage of (50.9%), while fear and apprehension for life came in last place with a percentage of (1.8%), although religious and intellectual extremism was not absent from the motives of some Christians to emigrate, as it came in fourth place as a motive for migration with a percentage of (38.6%).(71.93%) reported that they were willing to allow their children to emigrate temporarily (education, work) and return again.

The results of a survey conducted by the Palestinian Center for Policy and Survey Research in the West Bank and Gaza Strip - during the period from January 27 to February 23, 2020 - indicate that the desire to emigrate among Palestinian Christians is much higher than the desire to emigrate among Palestinian Muslims; in fact, this percentage in the West Bank and Gaza Strip is about twice the percentage among Muslims. The largest percentage of those wishing to emigrate say they want to go to the United States or Canada, while Europe comes in third place. The largest percentage say that the reason for thinking about emigrating is economic, while smaller percentages say that they are looking for educational opportunities or a safer and more stable place, less corruption, or more freedom and religious tolerance<sup>(1)</sup>.

But the survey found other reasons, some of which are due to the circumstances of the Israeli occupation or the internal Palestinian situation. For example, Christians complain about the effects of the occupation, such as checkpoints, settler attacks, and land confiscation. They also complain about the lack of security, and a large majority of them believe that the Israeli occupation wants to expel them from their homeland. As for the internal situation, there is a complaint and severe concern about the lack of security, fear of crime and theft, the absence of freedoms and the rule of law, and the spread of corruption. There is also clear concern about the presence of Salafi religious groups in Palestinian society<sup>(2)</sup>.

Several factors contributed to pushing Palestinian Christian citizens - especially young people - to emigrate from the Gaza Strip. The division, the repeated Israeli wars, the challenges of the economic situation, and the increasing rates of poverty and unemployment were major factors in pushing large numbers - including entire families - to leave Gaza, either under pressure from the economic situation, or due to political and security unrest, and hate speech.

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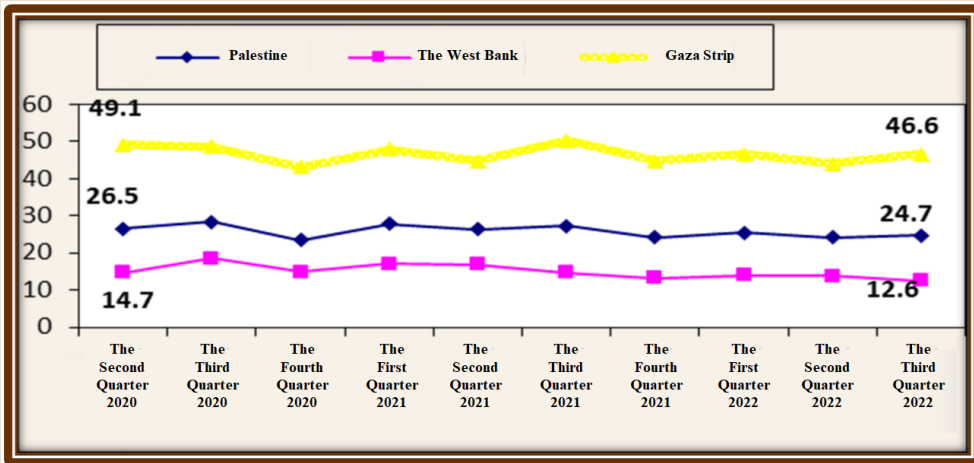
(1) Reasons for the migration of Palestinian Christians and ways to reduce it, Palestinian Center for Political and Christian Research, Ramallah, Palestine, 2020 AD, p.1.

(2) Reasons for the migration of Palestinian Christians and ways to reduce it, op. cit, p.4.

**Third: The economic conditions and their impact on the Christian presence in Gaza:**

The number of Palestinians at the end of 2022 was estimated at about 14.3 million Palestinians, of whom about 5.4 million Palestinians live in the West Bank and Gaza Strip, or 37.8%, and in historical Palestine there are 7.1 million Palestinians, which is equal to the number of Jews in historical Palestine, while in the Gaza Strip the number is 2.2 million individuals.<sup>(1)</sup> However, the Palestinian Central Bureau of Statistics no longer mentions in its annual statistics the religious classification of Palestinian society, noting that the 2017 census is the last population census conducted in Palestine to date.

The unemployment rate among labor force participants (15 years and above) reached about 25% in the third quarter of 2022, while the total underutilization of labor reached about 31%, according to the International Labor Organization standards (ICLS-19th). The disparity in the unemployment rate between the West Bank and the Gaza Strip remains large, as this rate reached 47% in the Gaza Strip compared to 13% in the West Bank. As for gender, the unemployment rate for males in Palestine reached 20% compared to 43% for females<sup>(2)</sup>.



**Figure (7): Unemployment rate among labor force participants for individuals (15 years and over) in Palestine by region, 2015-2021 AD<sup>(3)</sup>**

(1) Palestinian Central Bureau of Statistics: Palestinians at the end of 2022, Central Bureau of Statistics, Ramallah, Palestine, December 2022, p.21.  
 (2) Labor Force Survey for the third quarter (July-September 2022), Palestinian Central Bureau of Statistics, Ramallah 2022, p.2.  
 (3) Palestinian Central Bureau of Statistics, 2022.Labor Force Database 2021.Ramallah - Palestine.



The number of unemployed people reached about 378 thousand in the third quarter of 2022, with 253 thousand in the Gaza Strip and about 125 thousand in the West Bank. The participation rate increased slightly in the third quarter of 2022 to reach about (46%) compared to (44%) for the second quarter of 2022, and increased in the Gaza Strip from (40%) to (42%), and in the West Bank it increased from (47%) to (48%) during the same period. The male participation rate in the labor force in the third quarter of 2022 reached about (72%) compared to (70%) in the second quarter of 2022, while the female participation rate reached (19%) compared to (18%) during the same period <sup>(1)</sup>.

Regarding the relationship between economic conditions and their impact on the Christian presence and migration from Gaza, the results indicated that (77.2%) believe that unemployment and the deterioration of the general economic situation constitute a motive for thinking about migration. While (96.49%) confirmed that poor economic conditions constitute a motive for migration in general from Gaza and not just for the Christian community, and (71.93%) indicated that the migration of members of the Christian community from Gaza is not related to the division; rather, it is a search for better opportunities and external education.

The Palestinian Center study indicated that (59%) of Christians wishing to emigrate have economic motivations, and the percentage of those who indicate the economic conditions in Gaza rises to (72%).(7%) say they are looking for better educational opportunities.(7%) also believe that the security situation worries them and makes them think about emigrating<sup>(2)</sup>.

The results of the study by Dar Al-Kalima University on the Christian community in Palestine showed that the main motive for migration among Christians and Muslims alike is the occupation and the economic reasons resulting from it. The study also showed that (28%) of Christians and (24%) of Muslims included in the survey are thinking about migration as soon as they have the opportunity given the deteriorating situation in the Middle East. The study indicated that migration is a common factor for all Palestinians and is not limited to one group over another. The reasons for migration were attributed primarily to the occupation and the resulting economic, social, cultural and political obstacles that affect Palestinians

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(1) Labor Force Survey for the third quarter (July-September 2022), op. cit, p.3.

(2) Reasons for the migration of Palestinian Christians and ways to reduce it, the Palestinian Center for Policy and Survey Research.

alike<sup>(1)</sup>. Immigration has become the ideal solution for all the problems of Palestinian youth in Gaza, and it has also become the available solution for Christian youth in Gaza. The scarcity of jobs, high unemployment rates, lack of marriage opportunities, and the housing crisis are pushing many young people to think about immigrating outside Gaza, in search of stability and work<sup>(2)</sup>.

More than (50%) of the Christian community in Gaza is below the poverty line, and receives assistance from religious institutions; however, this assistance is in the context of temporary unemployment and relief aid, which does not contribute to supporting the steadfastness of the Christian presence in Gaza. There are programs provided by the Patriarchal Mission; however, they are limited programs that are not intended for Christians only, but rather all citizens benefit from them<sup>(3)</sup>. The Christian community in Gaza is part of the general Palestinian society, and there are classes and strata within it. There is a part of the Christian community from the rich class, and a part from the middle class; but there is a large part of the poor. According to estimates by Christian institutions, more than (50%) of the Christian community in Gaza is below the poverty line, as a result of the lack of opportunities and the high unemployment rates<sup>(4)</sup>.

There is no doubt that the division and the deterioration of the economic situation in Gaza are factors that repel the Christian community from Gaza. The economic and social pressures that Palestinian society is exposed to are factors that push Palestinian youth to leave Gaza, especially Christian youth<sup>(5)</sup>. The increase in unemployment rates in the Gaza Strip, which have reached unprecedented levels worldwide, as well as the widening circle of poverty and the increase in food insecurity among citizens in the Gaza Strip, in addition to the lack of opportunities for young people in the Gaza Strip to obtain job opportunities, as well as the collapse of the private sector due to the destruction of economic facilities and companies as a result of the repeated wars on the Strip in recent years, in addition to the Israeli restrictions on the movement of imports and exports, and many other factors, ultimately lead to the absence of hope and the increasing state of

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(1) The Migration of Palestinian Christians: Causes and Consequences, Dar Al-Kalima University, Bethlehem, Palestine, 2017, available at <https://bit.ly/3OjI4QS>.

(2) Interview: J.A., a youth activist from the Christian community in Gaza, 6/26/2023.

(3) Interview: Al-Jilda, Elias, Board Member, YMCA, General Federation of Palestinian Workers, Gaza, Palestine, 6/6/2023.

(4) Interview: Anton, George: Administrative Director of Caritas Jerusalem, Gaza, Palestine 7/6/2023.

(5) Interview: Shaaban, Omar, Director of PalTink Foundation for Strategic Studies, Gaza, Palestine, 8/9/2023.

uncertainty about the future among young people in the Gaza Strip, including Christian youth, and constitute fertile ground for Christian youth to flee Gaza, in search of a better life regardless of the risks of migration, which explains the increase in the number of young people who have actually emigrated from the Strip in recent years<sup>(1)</sup>.

The Christian community in Gaza suffers from a scarcity of jobs due to the absence of the Palestinian Authority in the Strip. It also suffers from a housing crisis, in light of the high prices of residential apartments in the heart of the city. It also suffers from a decline in the levels of official and popular support to strengthen its steadfastness. Most Christian institutions provide limited support in the framework of relief and temporary employment, and this does not contribute to enabling Christian youth in Gaza to bear the costs of marriage and married life<sup>(2)</sup>. The current conditions in the Gaza Strip, including the siege, division, lack of opportunities, increasing rates of poverty and unemployment, and the state of destitution, are considered a repellent environment not only for the Christian community, but for all of Palestinian society in general - especially the youth - as a result of the many challenges that the Gaza Strip has been going through during the years of division<sup>(3)</sup>.

The economic and commercial transformations that have struck Palestinian society over the past decades have affected the Palestinian Christian community in Gaza. Most Christian families worked in crafts and passed these crafts on to their children, which represented a steady source of income for them, such as painting, blacksmithing, carpentry, and watch repair and sales. However, with the decline in interest in these crafts, the Christian community has lost many jobs that provided many jobs for Christian youth in Gaza.

There is a complex situation represented by the high rates of poverty and unemployment, and the scarcity of jobs, in addition to the measures of the Israeli occupation, such as the siege and repeated wars, which have become a challenge to Palestinian society in general, and the Christian presence in particular, and constitute a motive for the emigration of all young people, especially in light of what these young people suffer from in terms of the

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(1) Interview: Halas, Raed, Researcher and Expert in Economic Affairs, Gaza, Palestine, 6/14/2023.

(2) Interview: Ayyad, Kamel: Public Relations Manager at St.Porphyrus Church, Gaza, Palestine, 6/18/2023.

(3) Interview: Younis, Issam, Director of Al Mezan Center for Human Rights, Gaza, Palestine, 7/23/2023.

absence of political participation, and the increase in poverty and unemployment rates<sup>(1)</sup>.

Lack of opportunities, jobs and economic challenges are the most prominent crises facing the Christian presence in Gaza, which requires providing permanent job opportunities for the Christian community in Gaza to support and enhance its steadfastness<sup>(2)</sup>. There is no doubt that the challenges of unemployment and the scarcity of jobs for Christian youth constitute the greatest challenge facing the Christian presence in Gaza, although the church provides assistance, but it is not sufficient and is unable to strengthen the steadfastness of the Christian citizen in Gaza<sup>(3)</sup>.

In 2014, the monthly income of Christian families in Gaza ranged between (no income) and \$4,226.36 per month, with an average monthly income of \$739.65. The results in Table 2 show that about one-third of Christian families, 131 (33.9%), were classified as having no income, while the number of families with a monthly income of less than \$300 was 24 (6.2%), while there were 31 families, or 8.0%), whose income ranged between \$300 and \$500. About one-fifth of Christian families (20.4%) had a monthly income between \$500 and \$1,000, and the percentage of those with a monthly income of more than \$1,000 was about one-third of Christian families (31.6%), equally divided between the two categories of \$1,000-1,500 and \$1,500 and above<sup>(4)</sup>.

**Table (2): Relative distribution of Christian families according to income categories** <sup>(5)</sup>

Category	Number of families	Percentage (%)
No income	131	33.9
Less than \$300	24	6.2
300\$- 500\$	31	8.0
500\$-1000\$	79	20.4
1000\$- 1500\$	61	15.8
1500 \$ and up	61	15.8

These percentages were in 2014, and thus the additional economic challenges, the continuation of wars, siege and division, and the increase in poverty and unemployment rates in the Palestinian community in the Gaza Strip were certainly reflected in the Christian community in Gaza, and left

(1) Interview: Younis, Issam, Director of Al Mezan Center for Human Rights, Gaza, Palestine, 7/23/2023.

(2) Interview: Syrian, Reem, community activist, Gaza, Palestine, 12/6/2023.

(3) Interview: S.S., a woman and community activist who preferred to remain anonymous, Gaza, Palestine, 6/26/2023.

(4) Murad, Rami, and others: Op. cit, p.21.

(5) The op. cit, p.21.

more poverty and unemployment, and led to additional numbers being pushed out of Gaza. Especially since the average monthly household expenditure in Jordanian dinars in the Gaza Strip (average family size 6.1 individuals) is estimated at 556.0 Jordanian dinars, while the average monthly individual expenditure in Jordanian dinars in the Gaza Strip is 91, and the poverty rate among individuals according to monthly consumption patterns in the Gaza Strip during the last five years - since 2017 - ranges between (53.0-55%) <sup>(1)</sup>.

Despite all the economic challenges that the Christian community in Gaza is suffering from, this community has not yet raised its voice, nor “screamed,” and is maintaining its presence, even though the poverty line has exceeded (50%), in addition to the housing crisis that Christian youth in Gaza are suffering from, due to the difficulty of finding housing in the center of Gaza City, and due to the high price of apartments in this area, and the difficulty of Christian citizens living in scattered places<sup>(2)</sup>.

There is no doubt that the poor economic conditions, the increase in poverty and unemployment rates, the decline in family and individual income in Gaza, and the decline in official and institutional support are major factors and reasons for pushing additional numbers of the Christian community to leave Gaza, in addition to the political reasons represented by the continuation of the division, the siege and Israeli wars, and hate speech, which required specific interventions to strengthen the steadfastness of the Christian community in Gaza.



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(1) For more information see: Central Agency for Public Mobilization and Statistics, available, <https://2u.pw/n2aBO3>

(2) Interview: Tarzi, Samer, media professional and member of the Board of Directors of the Palestinian Journalists Syndicate, Gaza, Palestine, 6/6/2023.



## The second topic

### Social conditions and their relationship to the Christian presence in Gaza

Social and family conditions play an important role in the lives of small groups, especially since the level of family cohesion and social communication reflects positively or negatively on the individual and the group; however, the cohesion of social and cultural structures in any society is a reflection of the political, security and economic conditions, and gives an indication of the extent of the group's ability to cohere or disintegrate.

The rapid developments that occurred in the political, security and economic situations in the Gaza Strip during the past decades were reflected in the nature of social and family interactions in the Christian community in Gaza, cast a heavy shadow over marital and family relations, and sparked many crises and intractable problems.

#### **First: Marriage crisis and weak fertility:**

The Christian community in Gaza suffers from a marriage crisis. The small number of young people and the high emigration of young people limit the opportunities for young men and women of marriageable age to choose the right life partner, which leads to searching for marriage and relationship options outside the Gaza Strip. Here, the young man or woman is forced to live outside the Strip due to the difficulty of bringing a life partner to the Gaza Strip in light of these challenges, due to the blockade and the difficulty of movement at the crossings.

The Christian community in the Gaza Strip is described as a “mature” community due to its low birth and death rates. The median age at first marriage for males is 29 years, and for females it is 21 years, which are high compared to the median age at first marriage in the Gaza Strip in general. The median age at first marriage for males in the Gaza Strip was 23.8 years, and for females it was 19.8 years in 2013.

(99.77%) of the Christians in the Gaza Strip are concentrated in the Gaza Governorate, while (0.23%) of them reside in the Khan Yunis Governorate.(89.18%) of the Christians in the Gaza Strip belong to the Orthodox denomination, (9.3%) belong to the Latin denomination, and (1.52%) belong to other denominations.(54%) of the Christian families are classified as refugee families, and (33.9%) of the Christian families are classified as having no income, while (31.6%) of the families receive a monthly income of more than 1000 US dollars<sup>(1)</sup>.

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(1) Murad, Rami, and others: Op. cit, p.8.

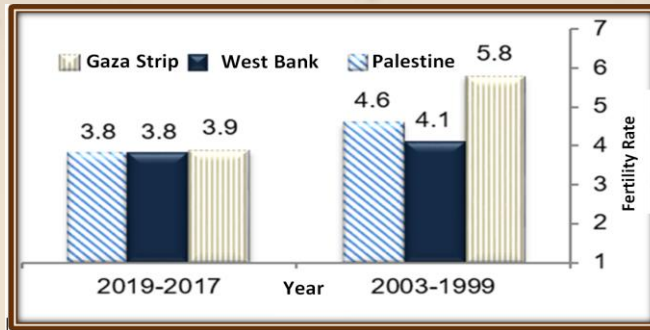


Figure (8): Fertility rate in the State of Palestine by region, selected years<sup>(1)</sup>

In general, there is a decline in the total fertility rate in Palestine. During the period from (2017-2019), fertility rates decreased to 3.8 births, compared to 4.6 births during the period from (1999-2003); this rate reached 3.8 births in the West Bank compared to 3.9 births in the Gaza Strip. On the other hand, the fertility rate in urban areas reached 3.8 births compared to 4.4 births in rural areas, and 3.5 births in Palestinian camps. Estimates based on the results of the Labor Force Survey in 2021 and the General Census of Population, Housing and Establishments 2017 indicate a decrease in the average family size in Palestine compared to 2007, as the average family size decreased to 5.0 individuals in 2021 compared to 5.8 individuals in 2007. On the other hand, this average decreased in the West Bank to 4.7 individuals in 2021 compared to 5.5 individuals in 2007, and in the Gaza Strip, the average family size decreased to 5.6 individuals in 2021 compared to 6.5 in 2007<sup>(2)</sup>.

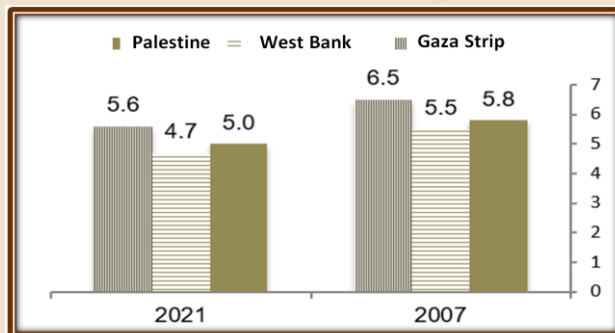


Figure (9): Average family size in Palestine by region, 2007, 2021 AD<sup>(3)</sup>

(1) Palestinian Central Bureau of Statistics, 2022. Demographic Health Survey Database, 2004.  
 (2) Palestinian Central Bureau of Statistics reviews the population situation in Palestine on the occasion of World Population Day, 07/11/2022, available at <https://2u.pw/ohXKrz>.  
 (3) Palestinian Central Bureau of Statistics, 2022. Estimates based on the results of the Labor Force Survey and the results of the General Census of Population, Housing and Establishments for the years 2007, 2021. Ramallah - Palestine.

In general, Christian families in the Gaza Strip were classified according to their nature into nuclear families, numbering 3.83 (98.2%) families, and extended families, numbering 7 (1.8%) families<sup>(1)</sup>.

The Christian community in Gaza suffers from an age gap. Most of the people now in Gaza are either elderly people who are connected to work, jobs, and family relationships. They have jobs and are socially and familially stable, or they are children. Here lies the age gap. Most young people prefer to either emigrate for reasons related to work, study, or marriage outside the Strip. This represents the biggest challenge facing the Palestinian Christian community in Gaza<sup>(2)</sup>.

The age at first marriage is higher for Christians in the Gaza Strip compared to the Gaza Strip as a whole, which is directly reflected in the decline in birth rates, which partly explains the decline in the number of Christians in the Gaza Strip.

The direct reasons for the decline in the percentage of Christians in Palestine are: the low birth rate among Christians, the reluctance to marry at an early age, the failure of development and renaissance projects in most countries of the region, and the feeling of Christians and other social groups that there is no point in staying due to the deterioration of the economic and political conditions there. Despite the difficulties of living, Christians, along with their Muslim brothers, are still struggling for the development and prosperity of this country<sup>(3)</sup>. These and other circumstances also led to an increase in the median age at first marriage for Christians in the Gaza Strip compared to the population of the Strip, as the median age at first marriage for males in the Gaza Strip was 23.8 years, and for females it was 19.8 years in 2013 AD, which contributes to a decrease in birth rates, and thus a decrease in the number of Christians.

The Christian community suffers from a decrease in numbers, as a result of the increasing rates of emigration of Christian families from Gaza. This affects the chances of marriage and engagement for young men and women in the Gaza Strip. It also suffers from a housing crisis, as a result of the lack of jobs and the high price of residential apartments in Gaza City<sup>(4)</sup>. The

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(1) Murad, Rami, and others: *Op. cit.*, p.19.

(2) Interview: Tarzi, Sami, Coordinator of the Papal Mission Projects in Gaza, Gaza, Palestine, 7/11/2023.

(3) Hanna Issa: The migration of Christians is a loss for the formula of Islamic-Christian coexistence, *Amad for Media*, August 14, 2016, available at <https://2u.pw/4JWrwG0>.

(4) Interview: Al-Tarzi, Rami, Director of the Arab Orthodox Cultural Center, Gaza, Palestine, 6/19/2023.



decrease in numbers causes the isolation of the Christian community in Gaza from mixing and integration, as young men and women suffer from alienation and lack of mixing for fear of bullying that may occur from some groups, and emigration causes a restriction in social relations, and a lack of marriage opportunities due to the small number, which pushes young men or women to get engaged outside the Gaza Strip<sup>(1)</sup>. The lack of job stability and the emigration of increasing numbers of the Christian community in Gaza constitute an additional challenge on the social level for the Christian presence in Gaza. How can we survive and continue in Gaza without a popular incubator and without marriage and intermarriage relations with the same people of our people in Gaza?<sup>(2)</sup>.

The age at first marriage for Christians in the Gaza Strip ranges from 14 to 50 years, with a median age of 25 years, with a higher age at first marriage for males, ranging from 17 to 50 years, with a median age of 29 years, compared to the age at first marriage for females, which ranges from 14 to 42 years, with a median age of 21 years, noting that there are two who married when they were 14 years old, but that was more than twenty years ago<sup>(3)</sup>.

The low fertility rate in the Christian community and the high age of marriage, in addition to the emergence of a new view of childbearing, the Christian citizen no longer sees the large number of children as a blessing or a gain, and he is no longer convinced by the phrase (the child comes and his sustenance with him); rather he began to look at things from a different perspective based on the fact that the large number of children has become a heavy burden that he is unable to fulfill, and he no longer sees in himself the ability to have many children and bear the costs of their education and upbringing<sup>(4)</sup>.

The population pyramid of Christians in the Gaza Strip shows several characteristics, most notably the large increase in the number of females in the age group of 20-24 compared to males in the same age group. This is common in societies described as expelling, which push young men to seek better educational and work opportunities. The number of females is greater than that of males for those over 65 years of age, while the number of females is less than that of males for the age group of 25-35 years. The

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(1) Interview: J.A., a youth activist from the Christian community in Gaza, 6/26/2023.

(2) Interview: S.S., a woman and community activist who preferred to remain anonymous, Gaza, Palestine, 6/26/2023.

(3) Murad, Rami, and others, op. cit, p.24.

(4) The Monk, Metri, Arab Christians, p.104.



population pyramid of Christians in the Gaza Strip also shows an increase in individuals belonging to the age groups of 10-14 years and 20-24 years, which can be explained by the fact that the political conditions that prevailed twenty years ago witnessed a state of political stability with the establishment of the Palestinian National Authority<sup>(1)</sup>.

Regarding social conditions and their relationship to the Christian presence in Gaza, the results indicated that 91.23% confirmed that the economic crises are reflected in social relations in the Christian community in Gaza. (45.62%) confirmed that the Christian community in Gaza is not socially cohesive and suffers from many challenges, while (28.07%) rejected this idea, while (26.32%) remained neutral. While (85.96%) confirmed that the warmth of the homeland and the Christian family is a factor that helps to remain in Gaza.(87.72%) indicated that the challenges of the political and economic situation increase the Christian citizen's dependence on aid from religious institutions.

The Christian community in Gaza is suffering as is the rest of Palestinian society. The political and economic crises have ravaged the social fabric within Christian society. The economic and social transformations that swept Palestinian society during the period of division have also cast their shadows on Christian society in Gaza, and have contributed to an increase in the number of young people migrating, and have led to the emergence of family and domestic disputes within our Christian society<sup>(2)</sup>. Although most segments of Palestinian society suffer from difficult economic and social conditions as a result of the siege and division, the Christian citizen suffers more than others, as a result of the state of dispersion and asylum, and the lack of numbers<sup>(3)</sup>. Just as the Palestinian political division has ravaged the economic conditions of the Christian community, it has also ravaged social conditions, created a marriage crisis, had serious repercussions on social relations within the extended Christian family, and contributed to pushing large numbers of young people to emigrate outside the Strip in search of a better job opportunity or a more stable security situation.

### **Second: Social assistance for Christian families:**

There is no doubt that the poor economic conditions, high rates of poverty and unemployment, and the presence of more than 50% of the Christian community in Gaza below the poverty line will increase the dependence of

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(1) Murad, Rami, and others: Op. cit, p.18.

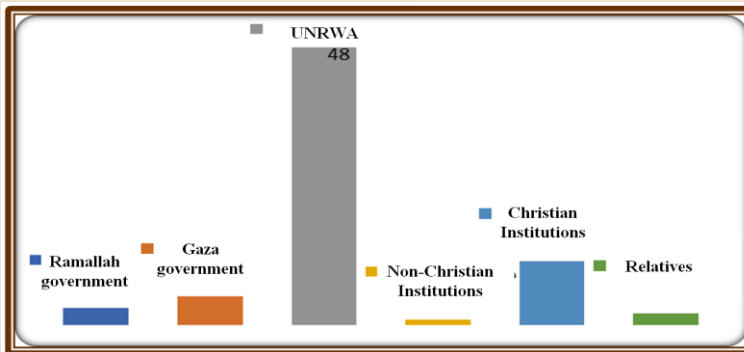
(2) Interview: Tarzi, Samer, media professional and member of the Board of Directors of the Palestinian Journalists Syndicate, Gaza, Palestine, 6/6/2023.

(3) Al-Jilda, Awda, Executive Director of the Federation of Churches, and Member of the Board of Directors of the YMCA, Gaza, Palestine, 7/5/2023.

many families in this community on the financial and relief aid provided by churches and Christian institutions operating in Gaza.

Christian businessmen provide support, but it is individual and irregular, and does not constitute a tool to confront the challenges of the Christian presence in Gaza. International institutions also provide relief services, but they are not sufficient to stabilize the Christian presence in Gaza<sup>(1)</sup>. The Christian citizen in Gaza provides part of his salary in support of religious and cultural institutions in Gaza - this is called (the tithe) - where the employee, merchant and businessman allocates part of his income to support institutions and poor families, as part of the culture of social solidarity carried out by the Christian community in Gaza<sup>(2)</sup>.

According to the survey conducted by the YMCA in 2014, the number of those who do not receive any assistance from any party was 1,223 individuals, representing (94.6%), while the number of those who stated that they received assistance was 70 individuals, representing (5.4%), as shown in Figure 10. The United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees (UNRWA) was the first entity providing assistance to 48 individuals, representing (3.7%), followed by Christian institutions, which provided assistance to 11 individuals, representing (0.9%), while the sources of assistance were distributed between the Gaza government, Ramallah, relatives, and non-Christian institutions<sup>(3)</sup>.



**Figure (10): Distribution of individuals receiving assistance according to the entity providing assistance<sup>(4)</sup>**

(1) Interview: Tarzi, Samer, media professional and member of the Board of Directors of the Palestinian Journalists Syndicate, Gaza, Palestine, 6/6/2023.  
 (2) Interview: Ayyad, Kamel: Public Relations Manager at St. Porphyrius Church, Gaza, Palestine, 6/18/2023.  
 (3) Murad, Rami, and others: Op. cit, p.36.  
 (4) The op. cit, p.36.

Christian institutions provide support to the Palestinian Christian community in Gaza to support its steadfastness in cooperation with some international institutions in the form of greeting cards on the occasion of Christmas. At the beginning of this year in January 2023, the Church of Saint Porphyrius provided (food items) to about 364 families, including 350 Christian families in Gaza, and 14 Muslim families working in Christian institutions. The aid included shopping cards of two categories: the first for the most needy families worth 360 shekels, and the second worth 200 shekels<sup>(1)</sup>. Religious and social institutions provide support for the Christian presence in Gaza; however, this assistance is unable to meet the needs of the citizens, because it is relief assistance and temporary work, and does not contribute to helping young people open homes or get married<sup>(2)</sup>.

Of the Christian individuals who receive assistance, 60 individuals (85.7%) receive food assistance, while the remaining individuals (14.3%) receive cash assistance. The assistance of the Ramallah government and relatives is limited to cash assistance, while the assistance of non-Christian charitable organizations is limited to food assistance. The results show that the majority of those who receive assistance (54.3%) are those whose families have no income, and this percentage decreases with the increase in the value of income. This indicates that assistance is provided in a manner that suits the needs of needy families. It is important to note that there are 300 individuals from families with no income who do not receive any assistance according to their statements<sup>(3)</sup>.

Regarding the role of religious, cultural and educational institutions and their relationship to strengthening the Christian presence in Gaza, the results indicated that (85.97%) confirmed that Christian cultural institutions contribute to strengthening general culture and raising national belonging among Christian citizens in Gaza.(85.96%) also confirmed the importance of Christian cultural institutions and their role in supporting and strengthening the Christian community in Gaza.(96.49%) indicated the importance of the continuation of Christian educational institutions in Gaza as part of the continuation of the Christian community.

Regarding the role of Christian institutions in strengthening the Christian presence in Gaza, the results indicated that (73.68%) believe that the

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(1) Interview: Ayyad, Kamel: Public Relations Manager at St.Porphyrius Church, Gaza, Palestine, 6/18/2023.

(2) Interview: Tarzi, Samer, media professional and member of the Board of Directors of the Palestinian Journalists Syndicate, Gaza, Palestine, 6/6/2023.

(3) Murad, Rami, and others: Op. cit, p.37.

division and Israeli wars contributed to reducing the role of Christian cultural and educational institutions in Gaza.

(100%) confirmed that strengthening the steadfastness of the Christian community in Gaza requires increasing the effectiveness of the role of cultural, social and religious institutions.(94.74%) also confirmed that supporting the steadfastness of the Christian presence in Gaza requires a wider space of freedom for cultural institutions and increased financial support.(64.91%) believe that there is general satisfaction with the role of Christian institutions in supporting the steadfastness of the Christian presence in Gaza.

There is nothing to worry about. Despite the social and economic challenges, the Christian community is resilient and able to overcome crises. We do not feel anxious about life in Gaza, where good relations prevail between Christians and Muslims in Palestinian society. There is coexistence, affection, mutual respect, and family visits<sup>(1)</sup>.

Despite all the challenges that the Christian community in Gaza suffers from on the economic and social levels, there are those who believe that this community is steadfast and has insisted on remaining in this land as part of its national, religious and cultural identity. Most of those whom the researcher met from the Christian community confirm this community's insistence on remaining and continuing despite the challenges.

### **Third: The state of coexistence and civil peace:**

There is no doubt that the social relationship between Muslims and Christians in Palestine is unique when compared to some Arab countries. Mr. Suhail Saba, a member of the Council of Representatives of the Greek Orthodox Church in the Gaza Strip, described the social relationship in a press interview as “the Christians of the Gaza Strip are Christians in religion and Muslims in culture.” This has made them enjoy a historical coexistence with Muslims that has made it difficult to distinguish between Christians and Muslims.

On another note, one study stated that the Israeli media has been spreading rumors that Christians are being persecuted in the Palestinian territories, especially the Gaza Strip, which is pushing them to flee the area. The response from the Christian community in Gaza was that the Christian

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(1) Interview: Syrian, Reem, community activist, Gaza, Palestine, 12/6/2023.

community in the Gaza Strip does not suffer from any pressure from anyone; rather, they live freely and without fear and practice their religions freely. This was confirmed by the former pastor of the Latin community in Gaza, Father Manuel Musallam, who stated that Christian-Muslim relations are at their best, and he refused to describe the departure of some families from the community from the Strip as a political migration, but rather an economic migration and nothing more<sup>(1)</sup>.

A study of the reasons for the migration of Palestinian Christians showed that: Although the vast majority say that they are not harassed by their Muslim neighbors or in schools and workplaces, between a fifth and a quarter complain of hearing harsh or blasphemous words and insults, and a very large minority says that they feel that most Muslims do not want them in this country. Despite this, the vast majority say that they do not suffer from discrimination on the basis of religion, between a fifth and a quarter say that they suffer from discrimination when looking for work or when requesting services from Palestinian Authority institutions. While the vast majority say that they feel integrated into Palestinian society, three out of ten individuals do not feel this way or feel hatred towards them from Muslim citizens, and about a quarter say that some of their Muslim acquaintances invite them to convert to Islam, and seven out of ten individuals say that they have ever heard a Muslim say that Christians will go to hell<sup>(2)</sup>.

Despite this, there is a state of coexistence between the Christian community and the Muslim community in the Gaza Strip. During the month of Ramadan, the Latin Monastery Church in Gaza organizes Ramadan tables, provides in-kind assistance to poor families, and contributes to providing medical and relief assistance to many residents of the neighborhood<sup>(3)</sup>.

In confirmation of the depth of relations between Muslims and Christians in Gaza, Father Manuel Muslim recounts many situations during his management of the Latin Church in Gaza, the most prominent of which was during the Israeli war on the Gaza Strip in 2008-2009, when churches were opened to shelter those displaced by Israeli bombing in the border areas.

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(1) Christians in Gaza – Sounding the Alarm, Phenix Center for Human Rights in the Middle East and North Africa, April 29, 2016, available at <https://2u.pw/r0nwJof>.

(2) Study: Reasons for the Migration of Palestinian Christians and Ways to Reduce It, Palestinian Center for Political and Christian Research, Nablus, Palestine 2020, p.1.

(3) Interview: Anton, Nisreen, Program Director at the Latin Monastery Church, Gaza, Palestine, August 2, 2023.

People would resort to the church and Christian schools in times of fear, as was the case with mosques, because they were places that should not be bombed. He mentioned that: “At the height of the war, I opened the Latin School for people so that they could get electricity and bake their bread, so I was nicknamed (the baker priest). When the war began, I had recently opened two wells for drinking water, and when people lost the ability to obtain this water during the war, I ordered the two wells to be operated around the clock, and to deliver water to the furthest possible area”<sup>(1)</sup>.

There are a number of religious and historical factors that have contributed to the consolidation of the Islamic-Christian relationship and encounter in Palestine in general, and in the Gaza Strip in particular. The most important of these factors is the Covenant of Omar, which Caliph Omar bin Al-Khattab gave to Patriarch Sophronius upon the conquest of Jerusalem in 638 AD to preserve the rights of Christians and their places of worship. This covenant is considered the most important charter between Muslims and Christians in Palestine, as the Covenant of Omar stipulated Islam’s recognition of the Christian holy places and their properties, and the independence of Christian churches in managing their own affairs<sup>(2)</sup>. Christian teachings, represented in the Bible, are filled with teachings that oblige Christians to deal with the rest of the followers of other religions with love and tolerance, and not to reject the other who is different in belief, color and form, and that love is the main slogan of the Christian religion, and Islamic culture and civilization are open to the civilizations of nations, and responsive to the cultures of peoples, and they are influential and influenced. The principle of the universality of Islam is the solid foundation upon which the relationship of the Muslim with the followers of the heavenly religions is based<sup>(3)</sup>. Hamas is also keen to maintain civil peace by forcefully confronting all cases of aggression against the Christian community or by overcoming many of the obstacles and crises that the Christian community in Gaza suffers from<sup>(4)</sup>.

The coexistence of Christians and Muslims in Palestine and the Gaza Strip varies between educational, economic, political, societal and union

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(1) Churches embrace war victims, Muslims celebrate Christmas...the true face of coexistence in Gaza, Arabi Post website, January 4, 2021, available <https://2u.pw/MtiLBDm>.

(2) Christians in Gaza – Sounding the Alarm, Phenix Center for Human Rights in the Middle East and North Africa, April 29, 2016, available at <https://2u.pw/r0nwJof>.

(3) Hanna, Issa, Islamic-Christian Coexistence and Brotherhood in Palestine, Amad Media Agency, May 24, 2016, available at <https://2u.pw/LK2EE8r>

(4) Interview: Naim, Basem, Head of the Political Department of Hamas in Gaza, and Head of Relations with the Christian Community in Gaza, Gaza, Palestine, 8/14/2023.

participation. On the educational level, Christians in the Gaza Strip have 5 schools, a kindergarten and a YMCA, where more than 10,000 male and female students study annually from different educational levels. The Palestinian curriculum is taught there, with different religious subjects, where Muslims learn Islamic subjects and Christians learn Christianity. Christian health institutions provide the necessary support and the necessary role for the Palestinian health sector to confront the Corona pandemic. “Christians have never neglected their duty towards Palestinian society and do not consider it an excess; rather, it is a duty towards our people, our cause and the Palestinian citizen”<sup>(1)</sup>. The results of the survey conducted by the YMCA indicated that out of twenty young Christian men and women in Gaza, 3 (15%) acknowledged that religious commitment is the motivation for staying in the Holy Land, 12 (60%) of them acknowledged that national belonging is the main motivation for patience and staying in Gaza, while 3 (15%) find that social relations are the motivation for staying in Gaza. All agree that these positions were taken under the difficult circumstances in Gaza, and if work and a decent life were available, none of them would aspire to leave Gaza<sup>(2)</sup>.

Christian institutions in Gaza work on national and religious education, and promoting the values of justice, freedom, and social cohesion, as part of the culture of the Christian community in Gaza. Despite the many challenges that the Christian community in Gaza suffers from, religious, educational, and cultural institutions work to strengthen social cohesion<sup>(3)</sup>. The Orthodox Church for Arab Christians in Gaza offers Sunday School, an initiative to teach children the Holy Bible, and the ethics of Jesus in morals, education, and good dealings with people. The teachings of the Christian religion require the Christian citizen to deal with others in a good manner<sup>(4)</sup>. The Holy Family Church provides assistance to poor families in the Christian community, such as grants for students in Palestinian universities, and part of the expenses of private schools. It also provides some assistance in the form of a food basket for poor families<sup>(5)</sup>.

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(1) Churches embrace war victims and Muslims celebrate Christmas.. A true face of coexistence in Gaza, Arabi Post website, January 4, 2021, available <https://2u.pw/MtiLBDm>.

(2) Murad, Rami, and others: Op. cit, p.16.

(3) Interview: Ayyad, Kamel: Public Relations Manager at St. Porphyrius Church, Gaza, Palestine, 6/18/2023.

(4) Interview: Ayyad, Kamel: Public Relations Manager at St. Porphyrius Church, Gaza, Palestine, 6/18/2023.

(5) Interview: Anton, Nisreen, Program Director at Holy Family Church, Gaza, Palestine, August 2, 2023.



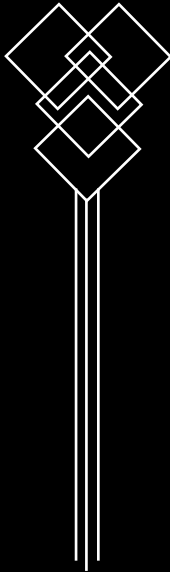
In addition to this, there is the contribution of civil society organizations and associations that work in the fields of education, health, sports activities, and others, and provide services to all regardless of religious background, which contributes to consolidating coexistence and common meeting. It is also necessary to point out here the resulting effects that the barbarism of the occupation and the Palestinian-Israeli conflict in all its dimensions have had on the population as a whole, regardless of religious background, as it has created an additional type of Palestinian solidarity and unity. The patriotism of the Christian citizen, his pride in his Palestinian identity and belonging to the homeland, and his participation in the resistance work against the Israeli occupation, along with the sacrifice of life, arrests, and the like, have never been questioned<sup>(1)</sup>.

The economic and social conditions are always a reflection of the political and security conditions, so the size of the challenges that the Christian community in Gaza suffers from on the economic and social levels came as a direct result of the political and security crises that the sector is suffering from. The increase in emigration rates among Christian youth from Gaza, the housing and marriage crisis, and the increase in poverty and unemployment rates among the Christian community are part of the humanitarian crisis that the Gaza Strip has been suffering from during the years of division, and on the other hand, they represent a major challenge in addition to the political and security challenges imposed by the occupation and the continuation of the Palestinian division.



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(1) Christians in Gaza – Sounding the Alarm, Phenix Center for Human Rights in the Middle East and North Africa, April 29, 2016, available at <https://2u.pw/r0nwJof>



## **CHAPTER Six**

# **Field Study Results and Mechanisms for Strengthening the Christian Presence in the Gaza Strip**

**The first topic: Results of the Field Study**

**The second topic: Mechanisms for Strengthening the  
Palestinian Christian Presence in the Gaza Strip on  
the Political and Economic Level**





## **Chapter Six**

### **Field Study Results and Mechanisms for Strengthening the Christian Presence in the Gaza Strip**

The Christian community in Gaza and Palestine is an integral part and a major component of the Palestinian national, social and cultural fabric, and efforts to support and strengthen it are a responsibility that falls on everyone, especially in light of the decreasing numbers and the fateful challenges it is now suffering from on the political, economic and social levels.

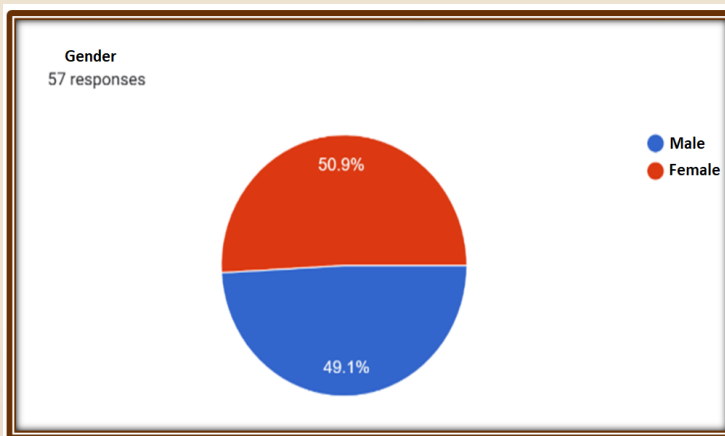
Strengthening the steadfastness of the Christian presence in Palestine and the Christian community in Gaza now requires specific interventions aimed at strengthening its steadfastness at all official, partisan and civil levels, through producing new policies and approaches aimed at breaking the isolation of this community, strengthening its steadfastness, and confronting the challenges it suffers from in practical ways far from the language of rhetoric and political slogans.

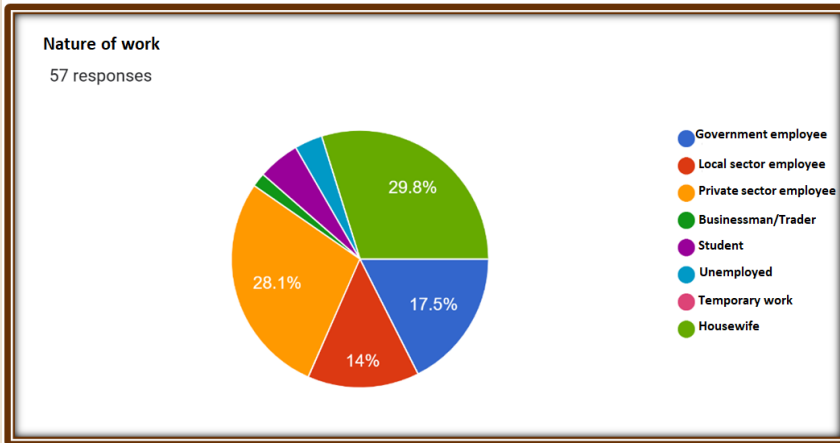
## The first topic Results of the Field Study

The results of the field study were very consistent with the results of the study by the Palestinian Center for Policy and Survey Studies on the reasons for the migration of Christians from Palestine in 2020, and the study by Dar Al-Kalima University in 2017 on the same subject, as the results confirmed that the Israeli occupation, the continuation of the division and the internal Palestinian crisis and its economic and social repercussions are direct and indirect reasons for the migration of the Christian presence from Gaza and Palestine.

### First: Initial information for the study sample:

About (10%) of the Christian community participated in the survey via the paper questionnaire that was distributed at a rate of (100), of which (40) were received, and the electronic questionnaire (57) that was designed to facilitate the response of the Christian community in Gaza. (49.12%) males participated, (50.88%) females, and only (3.51%) of them were aged 18-25, which means that this group feels a lack of interest in the general and private issues of the Christian community, or an unwillingness to express their opinions for various reasons. Regarding the nature of the sample's work, the results indicate that (29.82%) are housewives, (28.07%) are private sector employees, (14.04%) are civil sector employees, (17.54%) are government sector employees, (5.26%) are students, and (3.51%) are unemployed. This confirms that the job-stable groups were the most responsive to the study, and have the ability to discuss such issues that concern Palestinian society in general, and the Christian community in particular.

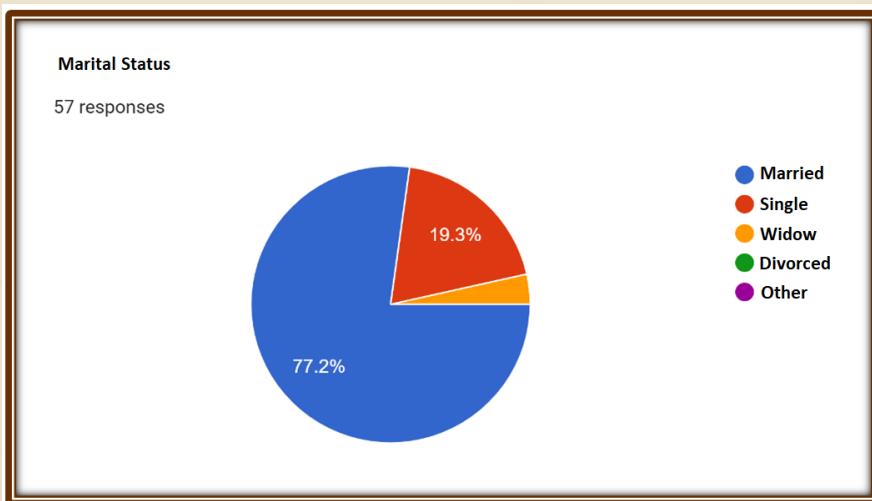


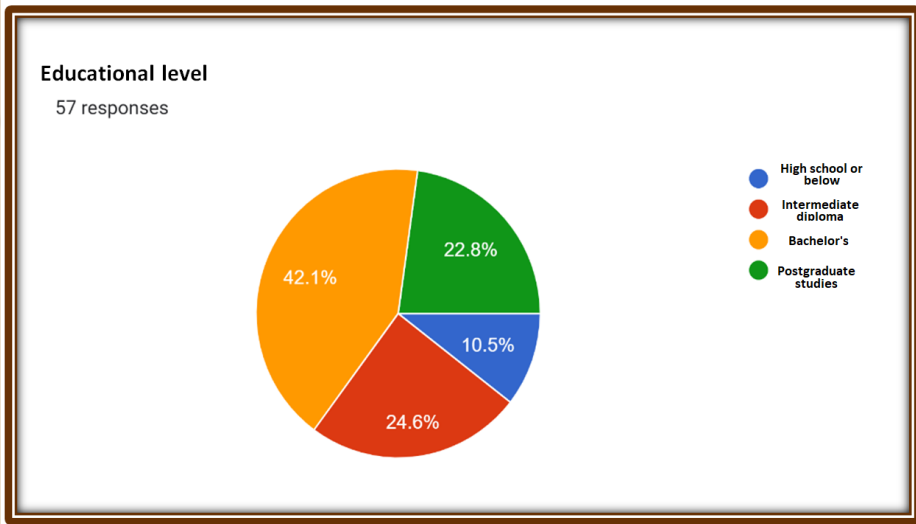


**Figure (11): Gender distribution of the study sample**

Regarding the social status of the sample, the results indicate that (77.2%) are married, (19.3%) are single, and this confirms that the socially stable group was the group most responsive to the study.

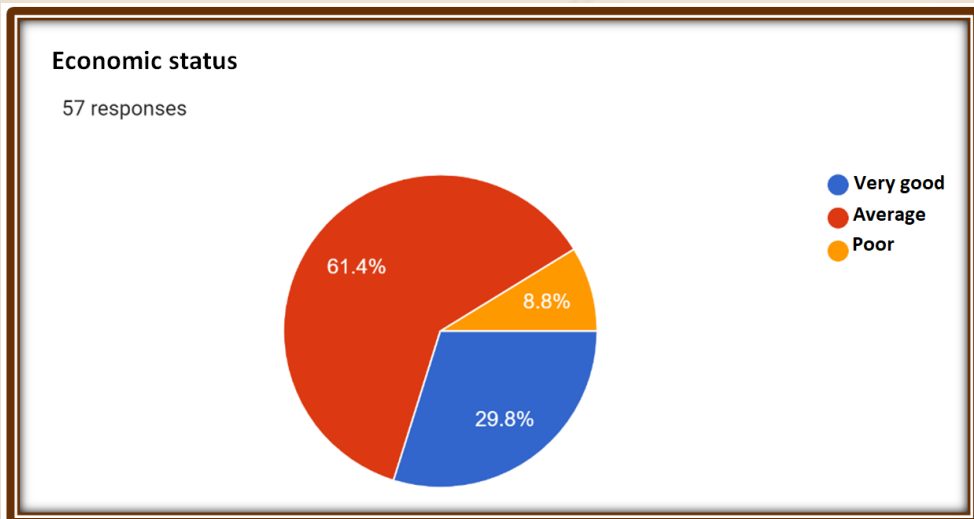
The results also indicate that education levels are high among members of the Christian community, as the results indicate that (42.1%) hold a bachelor’s degree, and (22.8%) hold postgraduate degrees. This confirms the Christian community’s interest in education, especially since good educational opportunities are available, whether in private schools affiliated with the Christian community, or in Palestinian universities, or in foreign universities, with the possibility of providing scholarships.





**Figure (12): Social status of the study sample**

Regarding the economic level of the family: The results indicate that most Christian families in Gaza fall within the middle or poor class. The results indicated that (61.4%) of the sample had a family income in the average economic range. The results also indicated that (8.8%) of the sample had a low economic status. This confirms that the economic status of the Christian community in Gaza falls within the average or low range, as about (70%) of the community suffers from economic challenges due to the siege, Israeli wars, and the ongoing Palestinian division..





**Figure (13): The educational level of the study sample**

**Second: The Israeli occupation and its relationship with the Palestinian Christian community in Gaza:**

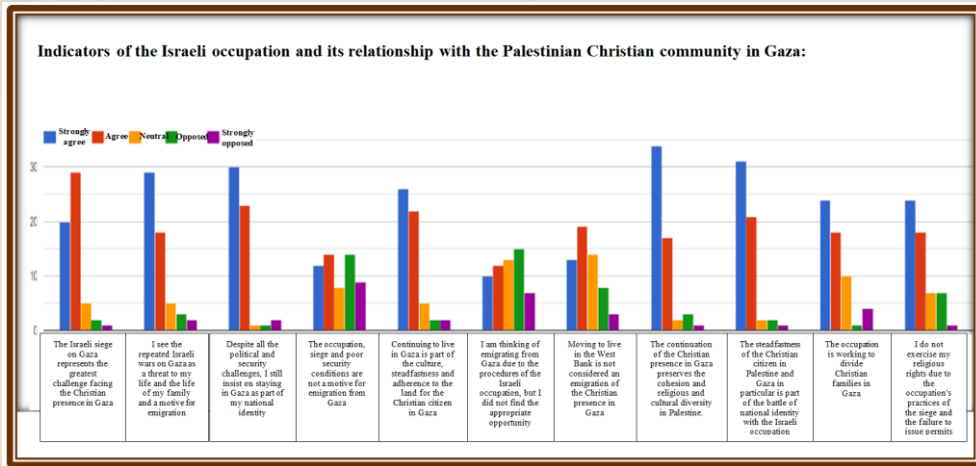
On the role of the Israeli occupation and its impact on the Christian community in Gaza: The results indicated that (85.97%) confirmed that the Israeli blockade is the biggest challenge facing the Christian presence in Gaza. The results showed that (82.46%) see the repeated Israeli wars on Gaza as a threat to their lives and the lives of their families, and as a motive for emigration.

Regarding thinking about emigration in relation to the Israeli measures of siege and wars: (38.59%) reported that they are thinking about emigration very much, while (26.32%) confirmed that they are not thinking about emigration, while (12.28%) confirmed that they are not thinking about emigration at all, and (73.69%) reported that the Israeli occupation prevents the Christian community from practicing its religious rights as a result of the Israeli practices of siege and wars, and (38.59%) reported that they are thinking about emigration from Gaza but have not found the appropriate opportunity to do so.

These results reflect a strong desire among the Christian community in Gaza to emigrate and seek an opportunity to live outside the Strip as a result of the security and political situation and the Israeli occupation measures that pose a serious and fateful challenge to the continuation of the Christian community in Gaza, especially since the occupation uses a policy of collective punishment against Palestinian Christian citizens in Gaza, through a policy of preventing the issuance of permits during Christian holiday seasons.

However, on the other hand (84.21%) stressed the importance of their continued living in Gaza as part of the culture of steadfastness and adherence to the land among the Christian citizen in Gaza.(89.47%) also stressed the importance of the continuation of the Christian presence in Gaza, as it is a factor in preserving cohesion and religious and cultural diversity in Palestinian society.





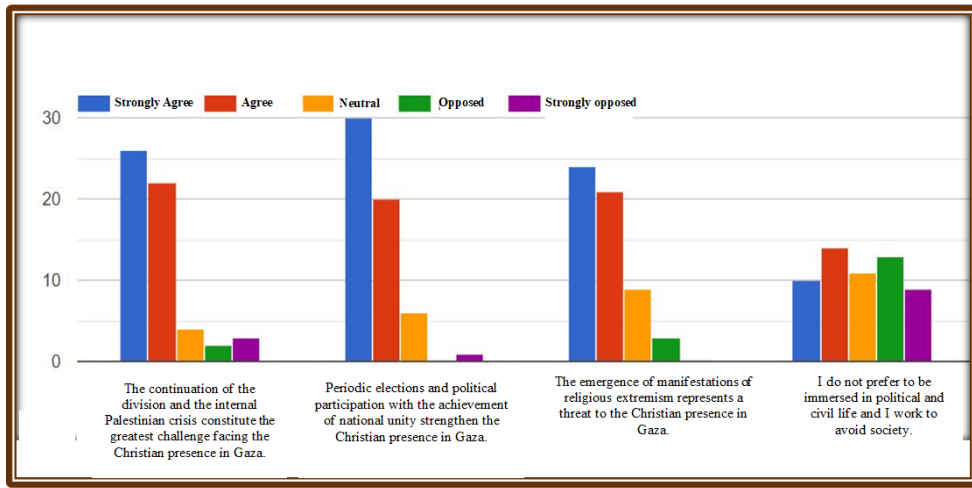
**Figure (14): Indicators of the sample results regarding the repercussions of the occupation on the Christian community**

These results reflect the importance of religious and societal coexistence in Palestinian society in general, and in Christian society in particular, in light of the Israeli occupation’s attempts to undermine Palestinian national unity and fragment the Palestinian national and religious fabric by restricting Christian society and forcing it to migrate in various ways and methods. The previous results also reflect the importance of building a sound and stable society on the social and cultural level that accepts religious, intellectual and cultural differences and diversity.

**Third: The internal Palestinian situation and its relationship with the Palestinian Christian community in Gaza:**

Regarding the internal Palestinian situation and its relationship with the Christian community in Gaza, the results showed that (45.61%) believe that the continuation of the Palestinian division and internal crisis constitutes the greatest challenge to the Christian presence in Gaza.(49.12%) believe that the absence of democratic practice and periodic elections constitutes a challenge to the Christian presence in Gaza, and (78.95%) believe that the emergence of manifestations of religious extremism constitutes a threat to the Christian presence in Gaza. However, 51.32% of the sample confirmed that they feel safe in Gaza and there is no need to worry.(47.37%) stated that they do not feel alienated in Gaza, and are not thinking of emigrating as a result.

These results reflect the extent of the need of the Palestinian and Christian community in Gaza to end the state of division and restore national unity, as the results confirm the need of the Christian community for political and societal stability by emphasizing the importance of democratic practice, as an essential part and factor of the feeling of citizenship.



**Figure (15): Indicators of sample results regarding immersion in public life and the threat of religious extremism**

While (47.37%) reported that they do not prefer living in the West Bank to staying in Gaza, indicating the Palestinian Christian citizen’s insistence on staying in Gaza despite all the challenges, (100%) confirmed that they believe that strengthening the steadfastness of the Christian community in Gaza requires increasing the effectiveness of the role of cultural, social and religious institutions.(82.45%) confirmed that the absence of official Palestinian policies supporting the Christian presence is a contributing factor to increasing waves of migration from Gaza.(73.68%) confirmed that the absence of democratic practice and periodic elections represents a challenge to the Christian presence in Gaza, indicating the importance of democratic practice in strengthening the Christian presence in Gaza.

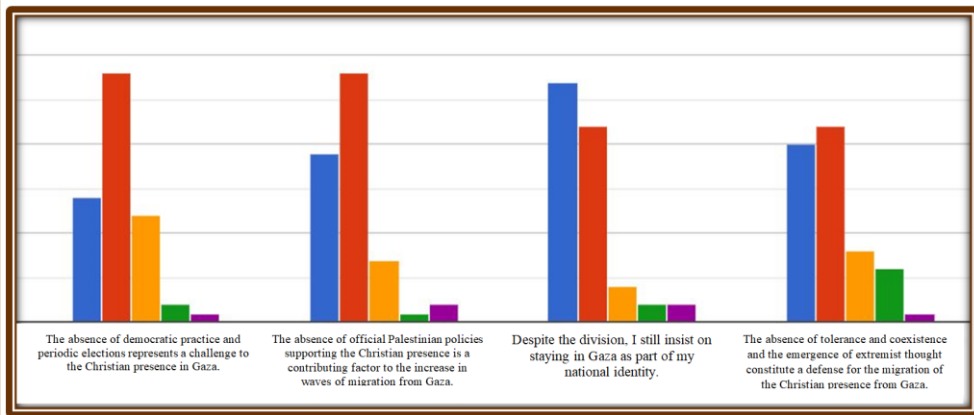
These results reflect the importance of producing official, partisan and societal policies to enhance the resilience of the Christian community in Gaza, through a diverse and harmonious set of programs and mechanisms that aim to break the isolation of the Christian community, enhance its resilience, and develop its political and societal performance.

Regarding the importance of immersion in Palestinian political and civil life in the Gaza Strip: The results indicated that (42.1%) of the sample oppose immersion in Palestinian political life, compared to (38.6%) who affirm the importance of this matter, while (19.30%) remained neutral.

These results reflect the state of isolation suffered by the Christian community in Gaza, due to the ongoing division, and the absence of policies and mechanisms by the Palestinian political and societal forces to integrate

the Christian community in Gaza into political and societal life, especially since everyone stresses the importance of breaking the state of isolation; but without adopting practical policies and mechanisms that contribute to reducing the state of anxiety suffered by this community as a result of some wrong practices, such as religious discourse, hate speech, and some individual cases of aggression that contributed to the isolation of the Christian community in Gaza from its political and societal surroundings.

(94.74%) indicated that strengthening the Christian presence in Gaza requires a wider space of freedom for cultural institutions and increased financial support. This indicates the importance of strengthening the space of public and private freedoms for the Christian community, especially in practicing religious rituals, and not influencing Christmas celebrations, whether through reactionary religious discourse, or by restricting New Year’s Eve parties.(66.66%) confirmed that the Palestinian political parties and forces are not doing enough to strengthen the Christian presence on the political and economic levels, indicating the extent of the decline in the political role of the Palestinian factions in strengthening the Christian presence in Gaza.



**Figure (16): Indicators of sample results regarding the absence of democratic practice and its impact**

These results reflect the decline in the role of Palestinian political forces and parties in terms of interest in the Christian community, and reflect the decline in political polarization by these parties of the Christian community with the aim of helping this presence to become more immersed in Palestinian political and societal life. They also reflect concern about the absence of a culture of tolerance and the emergence of extremist thought, as it constitutes a factor threatening the Christian presence in Palestine.

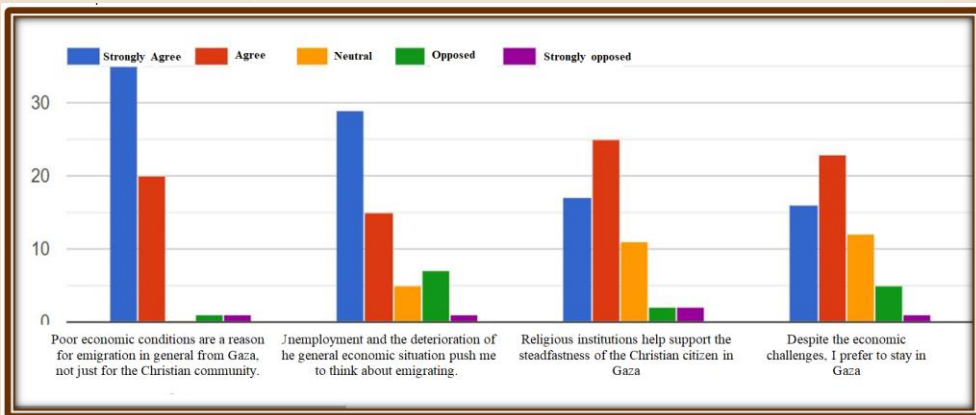


**Fourth: The economic and social conditions and their relationship to the reduction of the Palestinian Christian presence in Gaza:**

Regarding the relationship between economic conditions and their impact on the Christian presence and migration from Gaza, the results indicated that (77.2%) believe that unemployment and the deterioration of the general economic situation constitute a motive for thinking about migration. While (96.49%) confirmed that poor economic conditions represent a motive for migration in general from Gaza and not just for the Christian community, and (71.93%) indicated that the migration of members of the Christian community from Gaza is not related to the division; rather, it is a search for better opportunities and external education.

These results reflect the connection between the poor economic conditions in Gaza and the idea of migration, as a basic factor and a main motive in thinking about it as a type of individual salvation and the search for a safe haven, especially since the Gaza Strip suffers from high rates of poverty and unemployment, and low standards of living, and 50% of the Christian community in Gaza is below the poverty line.

(71.93%) confirmed that they are willing to allow their children to immigrate temporarily (education, work) and return again, indicating the possibility of accepting immigration for economic reasons, and (47.37%) opposed moving to live in the West Bank, and (78.95%) indicated that the housing crisis and lack of jobs constitute the biggest challenge facing the Christian community in Gaza.(59.65%) indicated that concern about the children’s job and economic future constitutes a motive for thinking about immigration.



**Figure (17): Indicators of sample results regarding the deteriorating economic situation in Gaza**

Regarding social conditions and their relationship to the Christian presence in Gaza, the results indicated that 91.23% confirmed that the economic crises are reflected in social relations in the Christian community in Gaza.(45.62%) confirmed that the Christian community in Gaza is not socially cohesive and suffers from many challenges, while (28.07%) rejected this idea, while (26.32%) remained neutral. While (85.96%) confirmed that the warmth of the homeland and the Christian family is a factor that helps to remain in Gaza.(87.72%) indicated that the challenges of the political and economic situation increase the Christian citizen’s dependence on aid from religious institutions.

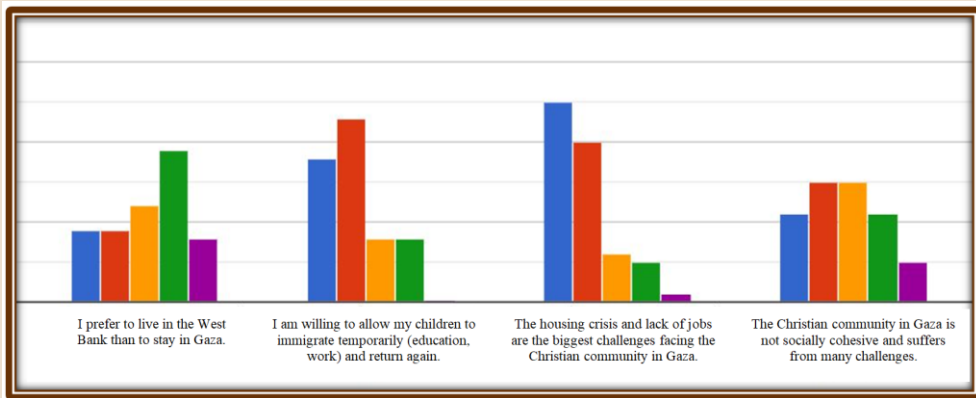
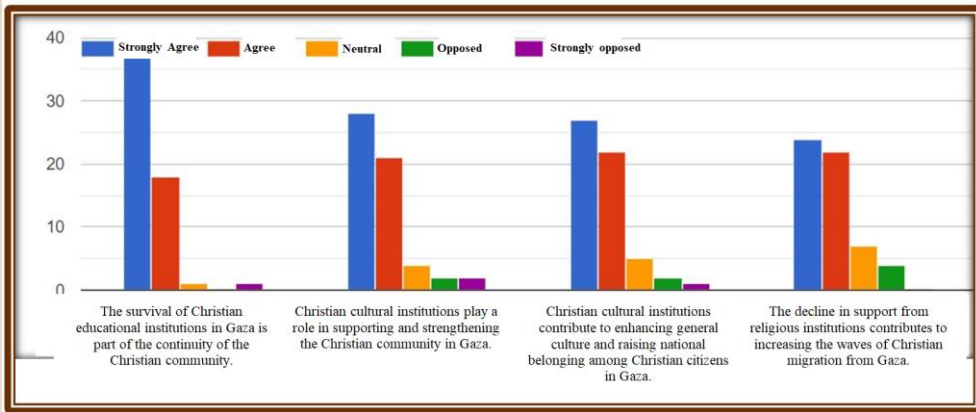


Figure (18): Indicators of sample results regarding migration from Gaza

**Fifth: The role of religious, cultural and educational institutions in strengthening the Palestinian Christian community in Gaza:**

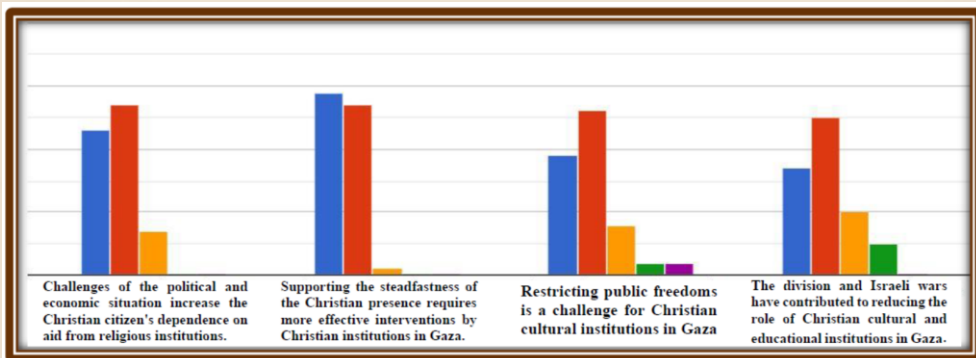
Regarding the role of religious, cultural and educational institutions, and their relationship to strengthening the Christian presence in Gaza, the results indicated that (85.97%) confirmed that Christian cultural institutions contribute to strengthening general culture and raising national belonging among Christian citizens in Gaza.(85.96%) also confirmed the importance of Christian cultural institutions and their role in supporting and strengthening the Christian community in Gaza.(96.49%) indicated the importance of the continuation of Christian educational institutions in Gaza as part of the continuation of the Christian community.



**Figure (19): Indicators of the sample results regarding the role of Christian institutions in supporting the Christian community in Gaza**

Regarding the challenges facing Christian institutions in Gaza, (78.94%) confirmed that the restrictions on public freedoms represent a challenge for Christian cultural institutions in Gaza. While (75.43%) saw that the existing institutions are sufficient but are unable to perform their role towards the Christian community in Gaza.(70.17%) saw that the restrictions on public freedoms in Gaza contribute to reducing the role of Christian cultural institutions.(96.49%) confirmed that the survival of Christian educational institutions in Gaza is part of the continuation of the Christian community.

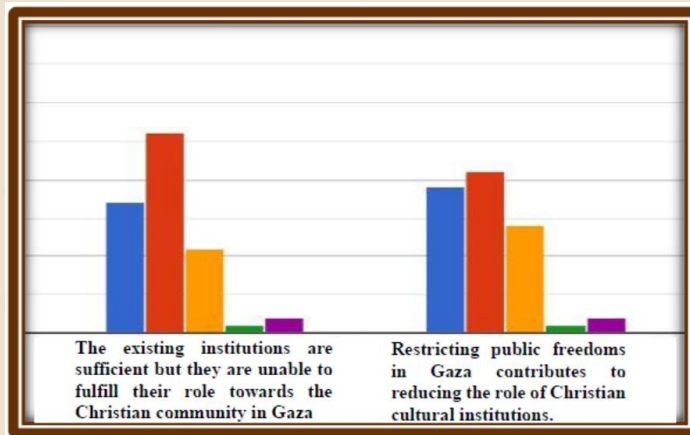
These figures and indicators about the role and importance of Christian institutions in Gaza confirm to us the great role that these institutions play on the national, religious, cultural, social and economic levels in the life of the Christian citizen in Gaza, which confirms the importance of strengthening them and developing their cultural, social and relief role.



**Figure (20): Indicators of sample results regarding the challenges of Christian institutions in supporting the Christian community in Gaza**

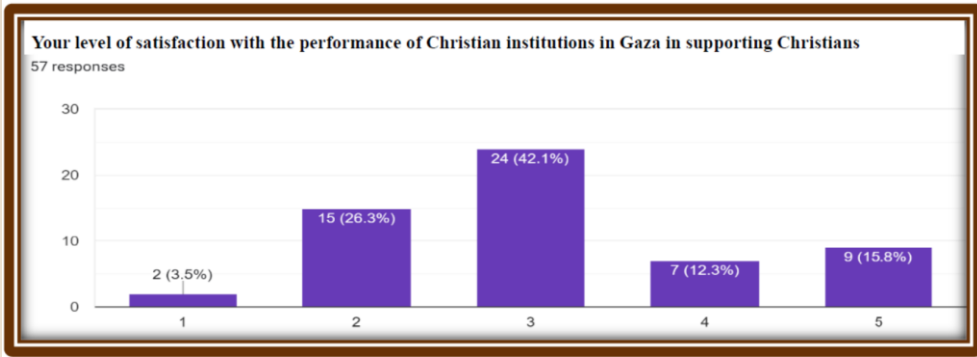
Regarding the role of Christian institutions in strengthening the Christian presence in Gaza, the results indicated that (73.68%) believe that the division and Israeli wars contributed to reducing the role of Christian cultural and educational institutions in Gaza.

(99.2%) confirmed that strengthening the steadfastness of the Christian community in Gaza requires increasing the effectiveness of the role of cultural, social and religious institutions. (94.74%) also confirmed that supporting the steadfastness of the Christian presence in Gaza requires a wider space of freedom for cultural institutions and increased financial support. (64.91%) believe that there is general satisfaction with the role of Christian institutions in supporting the steadfastness of the Christian presence in Gaza.



**Figure (21): Indicators of the sample results regarding the restrictions on Christian institutions in supporting the Christian community in Gaza**

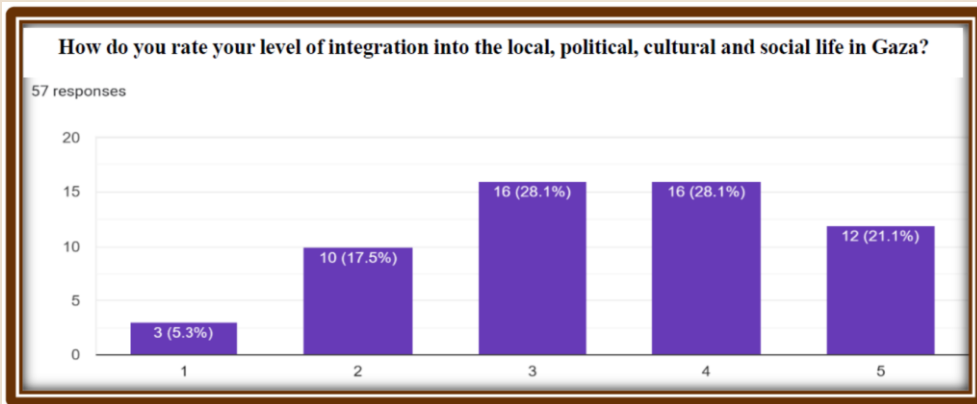
These results confirm that the importance of the survival and development of the performance of Christian institutions operating in Gaza is part of the mechanisms for strengthening the resilience of the Christian community in Gaza. Most of the results confirmed the importance of the survival of these institutions, lifting the restrictions imposed on them, and empowering and supporting them, in a way that contributes to reducing the migration of members of the Christian community in Gaza.



**Figure (22): Indicators of sample results regarding sample satisfaction with the services of Christian institutions in Gaza**

**Sixth: Indicators of interest in public issues:**

Regarding levels of involvement in public life and interest in Palestinian political situations, (31.58%) reported that they follow events well, (36.84%) that their level of follow-up is weak, and (21.05%) that their level of follow-up of events and public issues is excellent. While (42.1%) confirmed that they prefer to avoid Palestinian society and political life.



**Figure (23): Indicators of sample results regarding the level of sample integration into the local community and the public sphere**

These results reflect the negative desire of the Christian community in Gaza to engage and immerse themselves in public life, as a result of the security and political challenges that the Strip suffers from in light of the ongoing division and siege. These disturbances and challenges have been reflected in the status of this community and the degree of its immersion in public life, and have led to a decline in levels of interest in public issues, and have harmed the status of this community at the political level, through an almost



complete absence from the decision-making centers of the Palestinian political forces and parties, especially since the members of the Christian community have been active in Palestinian political life since the beginning of the Palestinian national movement.

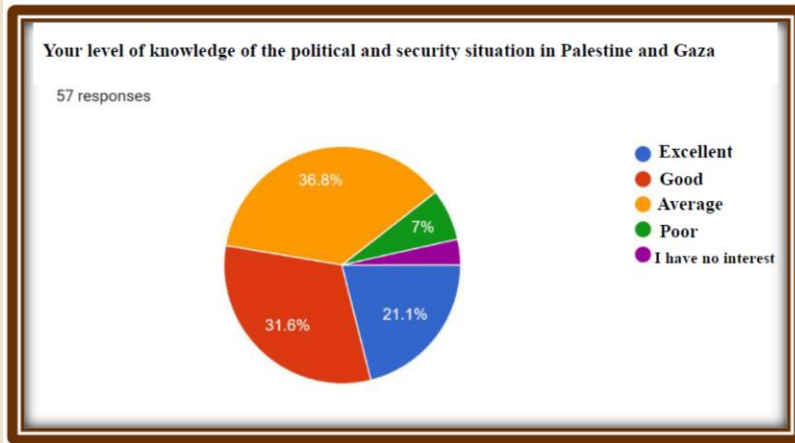
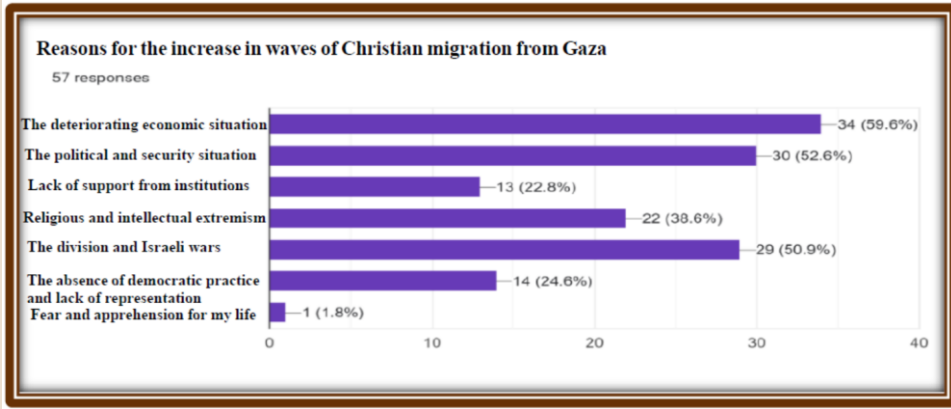


Figure (24): Indicators of sample results regarding the sample’s level of knowledge of political and security situations

**Seventh: Reasons for the increase in waves of migration of the Christian community from Gaza:**

Regarding the reasons for the increase in waves of migration from the Christian community in Gaza, the results confirmed that the deteriorating economic situation was the biggest motive for migration, as (59.6%) reported that the economic situation was the direct reason for migration, in addition to the political and security situation, which came in second place with a rate of (52.6%), while the Israeli wars on the Gaza Strip came in third place with a rate of (50.9%), while fear and apprehension for life came in last place with a rate of (1.8%), although religious and intellectual extremism was not absent from the motive for migration among some Christians, as it came in fourth place as a motive for migration with a rate of (38.6%).(71.93%) reported that they were willing to allow their children to migrate temporarily (education, work) and return again.

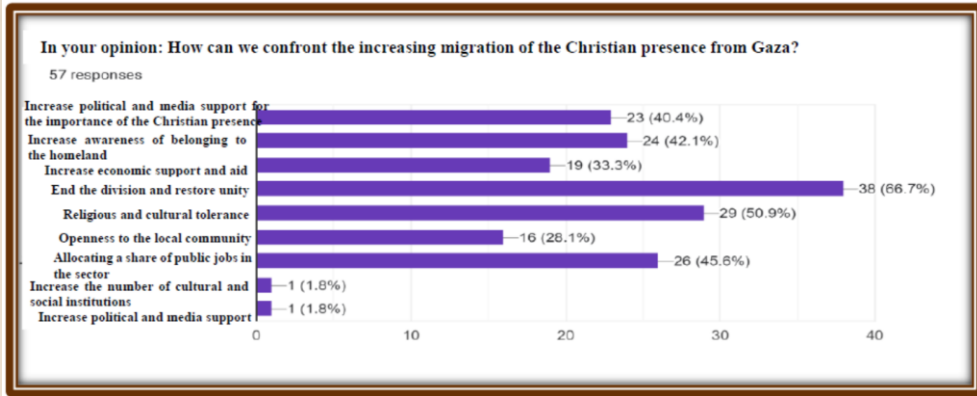


**Figure (25): Indicators of sample results regarding the reasons for the increase in waves of migration from Gaza.**

These results confirm that the internal Palestinian situation, the continuation of the division, the challenges of the economic and political situation, and the continuation of the wars and the Israeli siege, constitute an environment that repels the Christian presence in Gaza, which gives importance to the necessity of ending the division and restoring Palestinian unity, in order to end much of the suffering of the Palestinian community.

Regarding the mechanisms to confront the waves of migration of the Christian community from Gaza, the results indicated that (50.88%) see the necessity of enhancing political and media awareness of the Christian presence in Gaza through the media, (22.81%) stressed the necessity of ending the division and restoring national unity as a priority for the Christian community, (50.9%) stressed the importance of religious tolerance and coexistence, and (5.26%) demanded the allocation of a portion of public jobs. The results also stressed the importance of openness to the local community by the Christian community as part of the mechanisms to empower the Christian community in Gaza, at a rate of (1.75%).

These results emphasize the importance of ending the division, restoring national unity, and increasing cultural and political awareness campaigns on the importance of peaceful and social coexistence in Palestinian society. They also emphasize the importance of breaking the state of isolation and closure by the Christian community by immersing itself in Palestinian society. Without these rapid measures, we could witness further declines in numbers and an increase in the rates of emigration of Palestinian Christian youth from Gaza, under the pressures of the political and economic situation, hate speech, and the state of isolation.



**Figure (26): Indicators of sample results regarding mechanisms to confront the phenomenon of migration**





## **The second topic**

### **Mechanisms for Strengthening the Palestinian Christian Presence in the Gaza Strip on the Political and Economic Level**

The Christian presence in Palestine - and Gaza in particular - has suffered from the absence of official policies at the level of the Palestine Liberation Organization, the Palestinian Authority, and the Palestinian political forces and parties. It has even suffered from marginalization by international institutions, in light of the continued Israeli oppressive policies that have tried to push the Palestinian citizen in general and the Christian in particular to seek an opportunity to live outside Palestine within the framework of the transfer policy through which the occupation authorities aim to reduce the number of Palestinians to confront the demographic crisis.

#### **First: Towards government policies to strengthen the Christian presence in Gaza:**

In light of the ongoing occupation and internal Palestinian division, Palestinian government policies represent an important and vital matter to enhance the steadfastness of any group or sector that needs to strengthen its role in Palestinian society, by adopting government policies that contribute to confronting the crises and challenges suffered by any social group in Palestinian society.

Given the magnitude of the risks facing the Christian community in Palestine, the Higher Presidential Committee for Church Affairs in Palestine addressed - in a letter issued by its Chairman, member of the Executive Committee of the Palestine Liberation Organization, Ramzi Khoury - the churches of the world, stressing that the alarm bell warns of a real threat to the Palestinian Christian presence, and the matter requires serious and rapid work, on all levels, to establish this presence and enhance its steadfastness.

Through his message, Khoury informed the churches of the latest developments in the Palestinian issue, especially what the Christian presence and Christian holy sites are being subjected to as a result of extremist Israeli policies, noting that Christians are being subjected to many pressures, whether through the Israeli occupation's restrictions on them in practicing their religious rituals, or the violations that Islamic and Christian

holy sites are being subjected to by settlers, and things are deteriorating<sup>(1)</sup>.

There is an important and effective role by the Palestinian Authority and the PLO in supporting and strengthening the steadfastness of the Christian presence in Gaza; but it needs to be developed and activated, so that it becomes able to meet the needs of the Christian community in Gaza for jobs and assistance<sup>(2)</sup>. The problem is that there are double standards in the support of the Authority and the PLO for the Christian presence between Gaza and the West Bank. The reality of discrimination has reached the Christian community itself, as the Authority provides support to strengthen the Christian presence in the cities of the West Bank, and this support is absent from the Gaza Strip as a result of the ongoing internal division<sup>(3)</sup>. The Palestinian people are capable of emerging from crises and facing challenges. The crisis of the Christian community in Gaza can be faced through governmental and civil interventions and policies capable of strengthening and empowering this community and enhancing its steadfastness<sup>(4)</sup>.

Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas stressed: "The task of defending the Christian presence in Palestine and the Levant is our mission; indeed, our duty, and we will not hesitate or neglect to defend that our East and our peoples remain united and rich in their diversity. Nothing will remain in this land except what benefits its people, regardless of their faiths and beliefs." In his message congratulating Christians on the occasion of the glorious Easter holidays in Palestine, he expressed his hope that we will celebrate the coming holidays as the sun of freedom has risen over our Jerusalem. He stressed in his message: "We celebrate Easter this year as a religious and national holiday, believing in the justice of our cause and the hope of liberating the Palestinian people from the arrogance of the occupation, so that they may enjoy dignity, freedom and peace on the land of our homeland and in our holy places<sup>(5)</sup>."

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(1) The Supreme Council for Church Affairs calls on the world's churches to take immediate action to protect what remains of the Christian presence in Palestine, Arab 48 website, April 19, 2023, available at <https://2u.pw/yRpwsry>.

(2) Interview: Al-Tarzi, Rami, Director of the Arab Orthodox Cultural Center, Gaza, Palestine, 6/19/2023.

(3) Interview: Al-Tarzi, Rami, Director of the Arab Orthodox Cultural Center, Gaza, Palestine, 6/19/2023.

(4) Interview: Anton, George: Administrative Director of Caritas Jerusalem, Gaza, Palestine 7/6/2023.

(5) President: Defending the Christian presence in Palestine is our mission and duty, Wafaa Information and News Agency, April 30, 2016, available at <https://2u.pw/2hgX3wU>.

Emphasizing the importance of the Christian presence in Palestine and Gaza, Palestinian Prime Minister Mohammad Shtayyeh said: “Our adherence to our Islamic and Christian religious identity in Palestine is the basis of our battle that we have been waging for 75 years to achieve our freedom and liberation from the occupation. Our great concern is for the diversity of all components of the national scene so that Palestinian nationalism is the incubator of religion and the protector of Islamic and Christian sanctities in Palestine”<sup>(1)</sup>.

However, despite the importance of these statements and positions issued by the leaders of the Authority and the Organization, there is a complete absence of government policies to strengthen the steadfastness of the Christian citizen. Many political, societal and human rights elites have confirmed the absence of official and governmental policies to strengthen the Christian community in Gaza, and have even suggested some of these policies within the framework of strengthening the Christian presence in Gaza.

Professor Yasser Darwish, head of the Union of Cultural Centers, believes that the absence of legislation, laws, and unified authority is the greatest threat to the Christian community in Gaza, as any changes or transformations that occur in any community have a greater impact on minorities and small communities. The extremist religious discourse and behavior have also affected this community, spreading fear and anxiety among its ranks, and pushing a number of them to emigrate outside Gaza<sup>(2)</sup>.

Professor Issam Younis, Director of the Al Mezan Center for Human Rights, stresses the importance of political forces - especially Fatah and Hamas - realizing the extent of the suffering endured by Palestinian citizens in Gaza as a result of the ongoing division and occupation. He says: “A greater sense of political and moral responsibility is required for these forces in order to end the state of division and the national catastrophe that has become part of the difficult, complex and confusing reality due to the state of Palestinian division”<sup>(3)</sup> Professor Omar Shaaban, Director of the PalThink Foundation for Strategic Studies, criticized “the international community’s mechanism for dealing with the issues of the Christian community in Gaza,

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(1) Prime Minister calls for support to strengthen the Christian presence in Palestine, Palestinian Cabinet website, May 30, 2023, available at <https://2u.pw/IptVdBQ>.

(2) Interview: Darwish, Yousry, Head of the Union of Cultural Centers in Gaza, and Member of the Palestinian National Council, Gaza, Palestine, 7/4/2023.

(3) Interview: Younis, Issam, Director of Al Mezan Center for Human Rights, Gaza, Palestine, 7/23/2023.

as it is part of the crisis and not part of the solution, especially since international organizations deal with this community as a kind of victim, so they try to provide them with assistance on this basis, to maintain survival within the framework of enhancing the state of privacy, not integration into society”<sup>(1)</sup>.

Professor Mohsen Abu Ramadan, Director of the Dr. Haidar Abdel Shafi Cultural Center, emphasizes the importance of the positive distinction that the Christian community in Gaza can obtain from the Palestinian Authority and the PLO, saying: “This may constitute an effective tool to enhance its steadfastness and support its existence, especially in light of the many challenges it faces”<sup>(2)</sup>. What is required is to amend the laws to ensure the strengthening of the Christian presence in Gaza and Palestine, by raising their representation in political life, and allocating a larger quota for them in the Legislative Council, municipal councils, association councils and youth centers, especially in cities where there are large numbers of Christians<sup>(3)</sup>.

Calling on the Palestinian Authority and the PLO to develop a comprehensive strategy to strengthen the Christian community in Gaza and the West Bank, and to listen to the people’s needs and their living and economic priorities<sup>(4)</sup>. The Palestinian Authority and the PLO are required to enhance their role in helping and supporting the Christian community in Gaza to support its steadfastness and strengthen its presence, especially since this community is suffering from accumulated crises related to the scarcity of job opportunities, the housing crisis, and challenges related to marriage and engagement, all of which constitute a motive for young people to emigrate. Therefore, what is required is to support the steadfastness of this community at the official level through intervention mechanisms and policies capable of meeting the needs of this community at the present time and in the future<sup>(5)</sup>.

Regarding the mechanisms to confront the waves of migration of the Christian community in Gaza, the results indicated that (50.88%) see the

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(1) Interview: Shaaban, Omar, Director of PalTink Foundation for Strategic Studies, Gaza, Palestine, 8/9/2023.

(2) Interview: Abu Ramadan, Mohsen, Director of Dr. Haider Abdel Shafi Center for Culture and Development, Gaza, Palestine, 6/19/2023.

(3) Interview: Darwish, Yousry, Head of the Union of Cultural Centers in Gaza, and Member of the Palestinian National Council, Gaza, Palestine, 7/4/2023.

(4) Interview: Al-Tarzi, Rami, Director of the Arab Orthodox Cultural Center, Gaza, Palestine, 6/19/2023.

(5) Al-Jilda, Awda, Executive Director of the Federation of Churches, and Member of the Board of Directors of the YMCA, Gaza, Palestine, 7/5/2023.

importance of enhancing political and media awareness of the Christian presence in Gaza through the media, in addition to ending the division and restoring national unity as a priority for the Christian community. The results also emphasized the importance of religious tolerance and peaceful coexistence at a rate of (50.9%). (73.68%) confirmed that the absence of democratic practice and periodic elections represents a challenge to the Christian presence in Gaza, indicating the importance of democratic practice in strengthening the Christian presence in Gaza.

Respecting human rights, promoting civil peace, democratic practice, expanding the base of political and community participation, and supporting civil, cultural and educational institutions may help support the Christian presence in Gaza<sup>(1)</sup>.

There must be official government programs that contribute to strengthening the Christian presence in Palestine in general, by allocating quotas of public jobs for all religious sects in Palestine (Muslims, Christians, Samaritans). The state and the political system must think about supporting and strengthening the steadfastness of small communities, and enhancing their steadfastness. The survival of the Christian community in Gaza and confronting the waves of immigration among the youth require specific interventions from the Palestinian Authority and the PLO in a deeper way<sup>(2)</sup>.

The absence of Christian representation in Palestinian political parties and forces at the level of decision-making bodies is evidence of the decline in interest of Palestinian forces and factions - especially leftist factions - in this community, which requires greater attention from these factions to the Christian community, through political polarization and affiliation. The parties have great responsibilities in attracting many segments of society to engage with them, especially Christian youth. It is required of the factions to review their calculations regarding the process of political polarization towards the Christian community in Gaza<sup>(3)</sup>.

However, some members of the Christian community hold the religious and societal leadership of this community responsible for the state of decline, saying: "The absence of Christian leadership in Gaza capable of assuming its responsibilities towards the Christian community, which contributes to

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(1) Interview: Abu Ramadan, Mohsen, Director of Dr. Haider Abdel Shafi Center for Culture and Development, Gaza, Palestine, 6/19/2023.

(2) Interview: Anton, George: Administrative Director of Caritas Jerusalem, Gaza, Palestine 7/6/2023.

(3) Interview: Darwish, Yousry, Head of the Union of Cultural Centers in Gaza, and Member of the Palestinian National Council, Gaza, Palestine, 7/4/2023.



reducing the existing challenges and difficulties, is one of the most important problems facing the Christian community in Gaza, especially since the absence of this leadership capable of assuming its responsibilities contributes to pushing many members of the Christian community to flee from this deteriorating reality”<sup>(1)</sup>.

It is now necessary to adopt government and party policies that contribute to strengthening the Christian community in Gaza, in terms of raising the rates of political participation, adopting government programs and interventions that contribute to stopping the rates of immigration, and creating job opportunities for Palestinian youth in Gaza.

### **Second: Towards partisan and civil policies that strengthen the Christian presence in Gaza:**

There are responsibilities that fall on the shoulders of the Palestinian religious parties and forces - especially the Hamas movement - to change the extremist religious discourse towards the Christian community in Gaza, in a way that guarantees this community the exercise of all its rights and religious rituals with complete freedom, and to give it ample space to express its religious and cultural hobbies, in a way that guarantees peaceful and societal coexistence, with the necessity of releasing public freedoms, and not restricting cultural institutions in practicing their traditional activities (dabke, theater, arts), in a way that guarantees strengthening the Christian presence in Gaza, as it is not acceptable to continue the practices of restricting public freedoms, and cultural and artistic creativity<sup>(2)</sup>.

The results indicated that (99.2%) confirmed that strengthening the steadfastness of the Christian community in Gaza requires increasing the effectiveness of the role of cultural, social and religious institutions. (94.74%) also confirmed that supporting the steadfastness of the Christian community in Gaza requires a wider space of freedom for cultural institutions and increased financial support.

There is also blame on the Christian community itself, as the state of isolation that the Christian community suffers from affects its continuity and survival, as there is a state of avoidance and non-mixing by many members of the Christian community itself, which causes a state of isolation on the political, social and cultural levels. Therefore, the members of the Christian

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(1) Interview: With a member of the Christian community in Gaza who preferred to remain anonymous, June 25, Gaza, Palestine.

(2) Interview: Darwish, Yousry, Head of the Union of Cultural Centers in Gaza, and Member of the Palestinian National Council, Gaza, Palestine, 7/4/2023.

community must break the state of isolation and integrate into political, social and cultural life more effectively, by getting out of the state of anxiety that afflicts this community<sup>(1)</sup>. Christian intellectuals had been involved in the Palestinian national movement since its birth in the late nineteenth century. It was Christians who organized the first protest movement against Jewish immigration in June 1891. Opposition to the British policy of supporting the establishment of a national homeland for the Jews in Palestine brought together Muslim and Christian elites in the Islamic-Christian resistance societies. The press, which was a distinctive channel for expressing the struggle against this policy, was represented by two newspapers run by Christians, "Palestine" by the Issa brothers, and "Carmel" by Najib Nassar<sup>(2)</sup>.

The human being is the center of the human development approach, and therefore the effective human being in his society is the one who seeks to employ his human values, and achieve development and a decent life for himself and consequently for the society in which he lives. Here we must remember that Palestinian Christians have formed, over several decades of Palestinian history, vital tributaries in reviving culture and spreading the spirit of national struggle, and Palestinian history is embroidered with the names of Christian symbols who are well-known in the fields of thought, culture, national struggle and political work, and who were advanced pioneers in defending the freedom of Palestine<sup>(3)</sup>.

The Christian community must also engage more in political and party life, and engage more in political, union and civil work by merging into Palestinian political parties and forces, as an integral part of this political and popular component. The democratic political factions and forces that believe in pluralism and freedoms must also work to attract members of the Christian community in Gaza in a way that restores this community's political and struggle status<sup>(4)</sup>. Christian-Muslim coexistence in Palestine is an internal process that leads to accepting pluralism as a source of wealth by rejecting violence. It is the way for the Christian citizen to reach a normal life. Coexistence is one of the indispensable issues for all citizens -

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(1) Interview: Shaaban, Omar, Director of PalTink Foundation for Strategic Studies, Gaza, Palestine, 8/9/2023.

(2) Sossie, Andezian, Christian Palestinians and national construction, *Confluences Méditerranée* 2008, p 68.

(3) Dima, Rishmawi, Resistance and Living.. The Role of the Palestinian Christian in the Struggle and Human Development, Islamic Movements Portal, Cairo, 2016, available at <https://bit.ly/3LdscwL>

(4) Interview: Anton, George: Administrative Director of Caritas Jerusalem, Gaza, Palestine 7/6/2023.

Christians and Muslims - because the nature of the intertwined relationships and common challenges impose on them cooperation for the public interest<sup>(1)</sup>.

This community must be appreciated - as an integral part and component of Palestinian society - as it has played a major role in the national, political and cultural movement, and has an economic, social and cultural role. This appreciation must stem from this role through respecting its uniqueness, and appreciating its national, struggle and cultural role, through a religious discourse that respects religious and ideological differences, and works to promote a culture of tolerance and coexistence, and respect for public and private freedoms<sup>(2)</sup>.

### **Third: Towards economic and social policies to strengthen the Christian presence in Gaza:**

Improving the deteriorating economic and social conditions in Gaza are driving factors to strengthen the Christian community in Gaza, especially in light of the high rates of poverty and unemployment, especially among Palestinian youth in general. When considering political and economic developments, about two-thirds say that they are additional driving factors for their desire to emigrate. When asked about how to address the phenomenon of emigration among Palestinian Christians, the survey found that respondents focused on the need for Palestinian decision-makers and church leaders to pay attention to the issue and work to combat this phenomenon.

The proposals presented focused on the need to improve economic conditions, such as creating job opportunities or providing housing and financial assistance to those in need, or on improving security and safety conditions, such as the need to enhance the authority's ability to impose order and law, or on the need to consolidate the values of democracy and tolerance<sup>(3)</sup>.

(82.45%) confirmed that the absence of official Palestinian policies supporting the Christian presence is a contributing factor to the increase in waves of migration from Gaza. The results also confirmed that the

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(1) Murra, Anton, George, op. cit, p. 11.

(2) Interview: Shaaban, Omar, Director of PalTink Foundation for Strategic Studies, Gaza, Palestine, 8/9/2023.

(3) Study: Reasons for the migration of Palestinian Christians and ways to reduce it, Palestinian Center for Political and Christian Research, Nablus, Palestine 2020 AD, p. 3.

deteriorating economic situation was the biggest motive for migration, as (59.6%) reported that the economic situation was the direct cause of migration.

Educational, cultural and social institutions provide support to all segments of Palestinian society, and do not only provide their services to the Christian community, as they are public institutions that contribute to enriching the cultural and intellectual life of Palestinian society<sup>(1)</sup>.

In Palestine, religious institutions have played a prominent role in the development of Palestinian society. Here, it should be clarified that what is meant by “religious institutions” are institutions that operate motivated by the principle of abstract faith, such that they derive inspiration and guidance for their activities from the teachings and principles of religion, and which focus their work on serving marginalized and oppressed groups. Through these institutions, Palestinian Christians have sought to participate and work diligently to advance the local community and provide a decent life for its members<sup>(2)</sup>.

Christian institutions provide all forms of support to the Palestinian community, especially to the poor of all classes and religions, as the institutions do their utmost to meet the needs of the Palestinian community, especially the poor in the marginalized areas; however, the continued siege and division hinder the ability of these institutions to meet the needs of these suffering people in light of the deteriorating humanitarian conditions in Gaza<sup>(3)</sup>. The churches in Palestine have worked to strengthen the steadfastness of the Palestinians in the homeland on the foundations of equality and love, as stated in the Holy Bible: “Love your neighbor as yourself” (Mark 12:30-31)<sup>(4)</sup>.

There is qualitative support from Christian institutions in Gaza, but it has become insufficient due to the major challenges in society, including the high rates of poverty and unemployment in Palestinian society - and among young people in particular - which requires more qualitative programs and

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(1) Interview: Al-Tarzi, Rami, Director of the Arab Orthodox Cultural Center, Gaza, Palestine, 6/19/2023.

(2) Dima, Rishmawi, Resistance and Living.. The Palestinian Christian Role in the Struggle and Human Development, Islamic Movements Portal, Cairo, 2016, available at <https://bit.ly/3LdscwL>

(3) Interview: Anton, George: Administrative Director of Caritas Jerusalem, Gaza, Palestine 7/6/2023.

(4) Dima, Rishmawi, Resistance and Living.. The Role of the Palestinian Christian in the Struggle and Human Development, op. cit.

interventions that aim to enhance the steadfastness of this society from the social and economic aspects<sup>(1)</sup>.

In light of the increasing needs of this community, the effectiveness of the services provided by international and Christian institutions must be increased, especially since most of these institutions do not provide their services exclusively to the Christian community in Gaza, but rather provide their services to all members of the Palestinian people from all classes and sects<sup>(2)</sup>.

The Papal Mission works to support the Christian community in Gaza in order to enhance its steadfastness, through programs that aim to improve and support groups and families in need of support, through temporary employment programs, vocational training and rehabilitation programs, and training and capacity building to support the steadfastness of this Christian community, especially the youth<sup>(3)</sup>.

The Church of the Holy Family - the only Catholic Church in Gaza City and the Gaza Strip in the State of Palestine - offers a range of programs and projects that aim to support the steadfastness of the Christian community in Gaza, including two-year employment projects for unemployed youth with an average of 70 jobs annually, scholarships, relief aid, recreational activities, and support for school expenses for Christian families in Gaza<sup>(4)</sup>.

Strengthening the steadfastness of the Christian community now requires specific interventions by official and civil institutions, especially since Christian institutions working in the field of relief do not only provide their services to the Christian community; rather, they provide them to the general Palestinian community, which suffers from the same challenges.

### **Fourth: Conclusions and recommendations:**

There are a set of conclusions and recommendations through which we can work seriously to strengthen the steadfastness of the Christian community in Gaza, and stop the state of decline in numbers that has begun to threaten its continuity and survival. The reason for the increase in these rates of decline

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(1) Interview: Tarzi, Sami, Coordinator of the Papal Mission Projects in Gaza, Gaza, Palestine, 7/11/2023.

(2) Al-Jilda, Awda, Executive Director of the Federation of Churches, and Member of the Board of Directors of the YMCA, Gaza, Palestine, 7/5/2023.

(3) Interview: Tarzi, Sami, Coordinator of the Papal Mission Projects in Gaza, Gaza, Palestine, 7/11/2023.

(4) Anton, Nisreen, Program Director at the Holy Family Church, Gaza, Palestine, August 2, 2023.

is: emigration, weak fertility, low birth rates, low marriage rates, and the high average age among members of the Christian community in Gaza.

### **1- Conclusions:**

A. Palestinian Christians have played a clear pioneering role in the renaissance of Palestinian society since the nineteenth century, and they played an active role in various social, cultural and political aspects, as they managed a number of schools, social centers, hospitals and universities.

B. Christians were subjected to displacement and expulsion operations carried out by Zionist gangs during the 1948 war, and hundreds of them entered Gaza from Jaffa, Lod, Ramla and Majdal.

C. The Palestinian struggle was more mixed after the 1948 war than it was before the displacement and expulsion, and the Palestinian effort of Muslims and Christians turned into a joint effort.

D. The Christian churches with their various sects formed one of the pillars of the Palestinian national struggle against the occupation, and religious officials did not tire of contributing to defending the Palestinian cause in various international and local forums.

E. A state of social harmony emerged between Christian and Muslim families in the Gaza Strip, as history has never witnessed a state of intimacy and love like what is happening in the Gaza Strip. The Christian presence in the Gaza Strip has never been interrupted at any stage, and Christian relations have confirmed the depth of the connection between Christians in Jerusalem and the West Bank with the Gaza Strip.

F. The Israeli repression and air force did not differentiate between Muslims and Christians, as churches in the Gaza Strip were bombed during the ongoing Israeli attacks on the Strip, and Christian homes were targeted, and martyrs were killed on both sides.

G. Christian relief organizations worked to alleviate the suffering of the siege and the poor economic conditions in the Gaza Strip, and opened their doors to everyone.

H. Christian educational institutions provided an advanced model for Palestinian education according to an advanced curriculum and educational methods, and Christian institutions provided various types of job opportunities for graduates, and covered the needs of poor families with their projects.

I. The absence of a rights system and a sense of citizenship as a result of the absence of democratic practice and the continuation of the division contributed to the emergence of a feeling of constant anxiety among many members of the Christian community, which prompted a large number of them to leave the Gaza Strip, in search of a safe life on a personal and professional level.

J. The Palestinian Christian community in Gaza suffers from a state of constant anxiety as a result of the ongoing division and repeated wars on Gaza. This state of anxiety is now reflected in the behavior of society as a whole and its individuals, especially the younger generation, who no longer prefer to engage in political or social life, and prefer to stay away from immersion in society, and think about emigrating.

K. The Christian community in Gaza suffers from a state of declining numbers, which threatens the possibility of the extinction of this important presence in the Gaza Strip, as a result of many challenges and difficulties, which have become an existential threat to this community. It also suffers from a state of isolation, as most members of the Christian community in Gaza no longer prefer to immerse themselves in political and social life, and are satisfied with the private space provided by Christian religious, cultural and social institutions.

L. The division represents the greatest obstacles and challenges to strengthening the Christian community in Gaza, as a result of the negative repercussions it has had on the Christian presence in Gaza, represented by the absence of a sense of personal security and job security for many members of the Christian community in Gaza.

M. The occupation and its arbitrary measures against Palestinian society - and the Christian presence in Gaza - are considered the biggest challenges facing the Christian community in Gaza. The occupation is working to fragment Christian families, prevent citizens from reaching the holy places in the West Bank, and hinder the family bonds and communication of many members of the Christian community in Gaza.

N. The housing crisis, scarcity of jobs, and lack of marriage opportunities are among the most prominent economic and social challenges facing Palestinian Christian youth in Gaza. The high prices of residential apartments in the city center, the scarcity of jobs, and the decrease in numbers represent additional challenges for young Christians who are about to get married to form a stable family in light of the siege and the high rates of poverty and unemployment in the Gaza Strip.

O. The extremist religious discourse - sometimes issued by some individuals - is a source of concern for the Christian community in Gaza. The call not to congratulate Christians on their holidays, which some Muslim clerics call for in Friday sermons, is considered a threat to civil peace and the state of coexistence and stability, and contributes to exporting a state of anxiety among many members of the Christian community in Gaza.

## **2- Recommendations to strengthen the Christian presence in Gaza:**

1- There are many mechanisms, policies and interventions that can contribute to strengthening the Palestinian Christian community in the Gaza Strip. These policies aim to reduce hate speech and create positive discrimination for the Christian presence in Gaza, including:

2- Emphasizing the depth of the historical relationship between Christians and Muslims in Palestine, and enhancing the state of peaceful and societal coexistence between them, by spreading the discourse of tolerance and acceptance of others, respecting religious and intellectual privacy, and maintaining constant communication with Christian churches during the annual religious holidays, in a way that contributes to facilitating any obstacles that prevent the freedom to practice religious rituals and rites in full.

3- Granting Christian service and relief institutions a degree of freedom to work, and surrounding them with a side of tax exemptions and fees; to enable them to provide the best services at all levels, and not to restrict them in holding cultural seminars or singing celebrations, especially on New Year's Eve.

4- The necessity of enhancing the human rights situation in the Gaza Strip, and respecting public and private freedoms, and the values of citizenship, rights and duties, as well as respecting the freedom to practice religious rituals and rites with complete freedom, and not affecting Christian holidays, and allowing the lighting of the Christmas tree in the Square of the Unknown Soldier, and the passage of scout groups in the streets of Gaza during the Christian holiday seasons, as was the case in the past.

5- The Christian community itself must first break the isolation in which it lives, and push its members to become more involved in political, societal and cultural life in the Gaza Strip. The Christian community in Gaza bears part of the responsibility for the state of isolation and contentment with the private space provided to it by the Christian religious, cultural and social



institutions in Gaza. The more the members of the Christian community become involved in political and societal life, the more this will be reflected positively on the Christian presence in Gaza in terms of preparation and influence.

6- The necessity of working to integrate the Christian community into political, societal and cultural life, through programs carried out by civil society institutions, political and societal parties and forces, based on the principle of respect and appreciation, and strengthening political and societal partnership. The absence of the Christian presence from decision-making centers within the Palestinian forces and factions, and within the boards of directors of associations and clubs is a responsibility that everyone bears.

7- Conducting municipal, union and student elections periodically in the Gaza Strip, which contributes to strengthening the Christian presence, while ensuring that this presence is granted designated seats in the municipal, union and student councils, which contributes to strengthening its role, and ensuring the effective political participation of this community.

8- Working to raise the levels of political participation of the Christian community, by facilitating the involvement of youth in Palestinian forces and parties, which contributes to increasing the participation of the Christian community in Palestinian political and societal life in Palestine and the Gaza Strip.

9- The PLO and the Palestinian Authority should work to allocate a percentage of public jobs to the Christian community in all of Palestine - and in the Gaza Strip in particular - by absorbing them into the PLO institutions operating in the Strip, and the Palestinian Authority ministries operating in the Gaza Strip, to ensure the provision of job opportunities for the Christian community and reduce the rates of migration.

10- Allocating a percentage of the jobs announced by the Hamas government to the Christian community as part of the efforts to strengthen the Christian presence in Gaza.

11- Allocating (1%) of the housing projects carried out by donor countries to the Christian community, to confront the housing crisis, and help in forming stable families, which contributes to increasing numbers, and reducing the rates of migration.

12- Increasing the effectiveness of the projects provided by Christian religious institutions to the Christian community, which contributes to



reducing unemployment and poverty rates, by unifying the work of churches from different sects in Palestine to achieve more comprehensive development results.

13- Working to reduce disturbing religious discourse, which contributes to promoting tolerance and religious and social coexistence, and preserving civil peace, by unifying the vocabulary of national and religious discourse with the aim of strengthening the bond of national unity among Palestinians as a whole, and strengthening the concepts of national identity, coexistence and common destiny for the Palestinian people.

14- Preventing violations in mosques and places of worship against the Christian community in Gaza by spreading the culture of tolerance and acceptance of others, and emphasizing that religious occasions for Christians are sacred occasions that must be respected and not belittled or disrupted.

15- Working to oblige the Israeli occupation, through the International Committee of the Red Cross, to allow Christian citizens in Gaza to visit holy places during the holidays.

16- The Ministry of Endowments in Gaza should conduct awareness campaigns in mosques and places of worship on the necessity of not offending the Christian community in Gaza, and the Hamas movement should conduct campaigns among its members to spread the culture of tolerance and peaceful coexistence towards the Christian presence in Gaza.



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# Appendix







**Appendix [1]: Names of the questionnaire reviewers and their majors**

No.	Name	Academic Degree	Major	Work Place
1	Emad Abu Rhma	PhD	Political Science	Masarat Center
2	Ahmed Daloul	PhD	Political Science	Editor-in-Chief of Ibn Khaldun Magazine
3	Raed Nejm	PhD	Political Science	Palestinian Planning Center
4	Khitam Abu Oudh	PhD	Sociology Science	Cultural Dialogue Center



**Appendix [2]: Initial and general information of the sample**

<b>Gender</b>	<b>Number</b>	<b>Percentage</b>
<b>Male</b>		<b>%49.12</b>
<b>Female</b>		<b>%50.88</b>
<b>Age</b>		
<b>18-25</b>		<b>%3.51</b>
<b>26-35</b>		<b>%28.07</b>
<b>36-45</b>		<b>%24.56</b>
<b>46-59</b>		<b>%26.32</b>
<b>60 and above</b>		<b>%17.54</b>
<b>Nature of Work</b>		
<b>Housewife</b>		<b>%29.82</b>
<b>Businessman/ Trader</b>		<b>%1.75</b>
<b>Student</b>		<b>%5.26</b>
<b>Unemployed</b>		<b>%3.51</b>
<b>Government Employee</b>		<b>%17.54</b>
<b>Civil Sector Employee</b>		<b>%14.04</b>
<b>Private Sector Employee</b>		<b>%28.07</b>
<b>Marital Status</b>		
<b>Widowed</b>		<b>%3.51</b>
<b>Single</b>		<b>%19.30</b>
<b>Married</b>		<b>%77.19</b>
<b>Educational Level</b>		
<b>Bachelor's</b>		<b>%42.11</b>
<b>High school or below</b>		<b>%10.53</b>
<b>Intermediate Diploma</b>		<b>%24.56</b>
<b>Postgraduate studies</b>		<b>%22.81</b>
<b>Family Economic Status</b>		
<b>Very Good</b>		<b>%29.82</b>
<b>Good</b>		<b>%8.77</b>
<b>Average</b>		<b>%61.40</b>



**Appendix [3] Results of the indicators of the Israeli occupation and its relationship with the Palestinian Christian community in Gaza**

	Percentage
<b>The Israeli blockade of Gaza is the biggest challenge facing the Christian presence in Gaza.</b>	
Neutral	%8.77
Oppose	%3.51
Strongly Oppose	%1.75
Agree	%50.88
Strongly Agree	%35.09
<b>I see the repeated Israeli wars on Gaza as a threat to my life and the life of my family and a motive for immigration.</b>	
Neutral	%8.77
Oppose	%5.26
Strongly Oppose	%3.51
Agree	%31.58
Strongly Agree	%50.88
<b>Despite all the political and security challenges, I still insist on staying in Gaza as part of my national identity.</b>	
Neutral	%1.75
Oppose	%1.75
Strongly Oppose	%3.51
Agree	%40.35
Strongly Agree	%52.63
<b>Occupation, siege and poor security conditions are not a reason to emigrate from Gaza</b>	
Neutral	%14.04
Oppose	%24.56
Strongly Oppose	%15.79
Agree	%24.56
Strongly Agree	%21.05
<b>Continuing to live in Gaza is part of the culture of steadfastness and attachment to the land among the Christian citizens in Gaza.</b>	
Neutral	%8.77
Oppose	%3.51
Strongly Oppose	%3.51
Agree	%38.60
Strongly Agree	%45.61
<b>I am thinking of emigrating from Gaza because of the Israeli occupation measures, but I have not found the right opportunity.</b>	
Neutral	%22.81
Oppose	%26.32
Strongly Oppose	%12.28

## Palestinian Christian Community in the Gaza Strip

	Percentage
Agree	%21.05
Strongly Agree	%17.54
<b>Moving to the West Bank does not constitute a migration of the Christian presence from Gaza.</b>	
Neutral	%24.56
Oppose	%14.04
Strongly Oppose	%5.26
Agree	%33.33
Strongly Agree	%22.81
<b>The continued Christian presence in Gaza preserves Palestinian religious and cultural cohesion and diversity.</b>	
Neutral	%3.51
Oppose	%5.26
Strongly Oppose	%1.5
Agree	%29.82
Strongly Agree	%59.65
<b>The steadfastness of the Christian citizen in Palestine, and Gaza in particular, is part of the battle of national identity with the Israeli occupation.</b>	
Neutral	%3.51
Oppose	%3.51
Strongly Oppose	%1.75
Agree	%36.84
Strongly Agree	%54.39
<b>The occupation is working to divide Christian families in Gaza</b>	
Neutral	%17.54
Oppose	%1.75
Strongly Oppose	%7.02
Agree	%31.58
Strongly Agree	%42.11
<b>I do not practice my religious rights due to the occupation's policies of siege and failure to issue permits.</b>	
Neutral	%12.28
Oppose	%12.28
Strongly Oppose	%1.75
Agree	%31.58
Strongly Agree	%42.11



Appendix [4] Field Study Form

1. Initial and general information

<b>1.1 Gender</b> <input type="checkbox"/> Male <input type="checkbox"/> Female	<b>1.2 Age</b> <input type="checkbox"/> 18 - 25 <input type="checkbox"/> 25-35 <input type="checkbox"/> 35-45 <input type="checkbox"/> 45-60 <input type="checkbox"/> 60 and above	<b>1.9 Natural of Work</b> <input type="checkbox"/> Government Employee <input type="checkbox"/> Civil Sector Employee <input type="checkbox"/> Private Sector Employee <input type="checkbox"/> Businessman/ Trader <input type="checkbox"/> Student <input type="checkbox"/> Unemployed <input type="checkbox"/> Housewife <input type="checkbox"/> Other
<b>1.3 Marital Status</b> <input type="checkbox"/> Married <input type="checkbox"/> Single <input type="checkbox"/> Widowed <input type="checkbox"/> Divorced <input type="checkbox"/> Other	<b>1.4 Educational Level</b> <input type="checkbox"/> Less than high school <input type="checkbox"/> Intermediate Diploma <input type="checkbox"/> University <input type="checkbox"/> Masters <input type="checkbox"/> PhD	<b>Family Economic Status</b> <input type="checkbox"/> High <input type="checkbox"/> Good <input type="checkbox"/> Average <input type="checkbox"/> Low

2. Indicators of the Israeli occupation and its relationship with the Palestinian Christian community in Gaza:

2	Indicators of the Israeli occupation and its relationship with the Palestinian Christian community in Gaza	Acceptance of the idea		Neutral Zone	How much I reject the idea	
		Strongly agree	Agree	Neutral	Strongly opposed	Opposed
2.1	The Israeli blockade of Gaza is the biggest challenge facing the Christian presence in Gaza.					
2.2	I see the repeated Israeli wars on Gaza as a threat to my life and the life of my family and a motive for immigration.					
2.3	The Israeli occupation contributes to reducing the Christian presence in Gaza.					
2.5	Despite all the political and security challenges, I still insist on staying in Gaza as part of my national identity.					

## Palestinian Christian Community in the Gaza Strip

2	Indicators of the Israeli occupation and its relationship with the Palestinian Christian community in Gaza	Acceptance of the idea		Neutral Zone	How much I reject the idea	
		Strongly agree	Agree	Neutral	Strongly opposed	Opposed
2.7	The occupation, the siege and the poor security situation are not a reason to emigrate from Gaza.					
2.8	Continuing to live in Gaza is part of the culture of steadfastness and attachment to the land among the Christian citizens of Gaza.					
2.9	I am thinking of emigrating from Gaza because of the Israeli occupation measures, but I have not found the right opportunity.					
2.10	Fear for life as a result of Israeli bombing and aggression is a reason for migration from Gaza.					
2.11	Moving to the West Bank does not constitute a migration of the Christian presence from Gaza.					
2.12	The continued Christian presence in Gaza maintains the cohesion and religious and cultural diversity of Palestine.					
2.13	The steadfastness of the Christian citizen in Palestine, and Gaza in particular, is part of the battle of national identity with the Israeli occupation.					
2.14	The occupation is working to divide Christian families in Gaza.					
2.15	I do not practice my religious rights due to the occupation's policies of siege and failure to issue permits.					

2	Indicators of the Israeli occupation and its relationship with the Palestinian Christian community in Gaza	Acceptance of the idea		Neutral Zone	How much I reject the idea	
		Strongly agree	Agree	Neutral	Strongly opposed	Opposed
2.16	I have not visited Bethlehem and the holy sites in the West Bank for years due to the Israeli occupation.					

### 3. Indicators of the internal Palestinian situation and its relationship with the Palestinian Christian community in Gaza:

3	Indicators of the internal Palestinian situation and its relationship with the Palestinian Christian community in Gaza	Acceptance of the idea		Neutral Zone	How much I reject the idea	
		Strongly agree	Agree	Neutral	Strongly opposed	Opposed
3.1	The ongoing division and internal Palestinian crisis pose the greatest challenge to the Christian presence in Gaza.					
3.2	As a Christian citizen, I have no political affiliation with any Palestinian faction.					
3.3	Periodic elections and political participation, along with the achievement of national unity, strengthen the Christian presence in Gaza.					
3.4	The emergence of manifestations of religious extremism represents a threat to the Christian presence in Gaza.					
3.5	I prefer not to get involved in political and civil life and try to avoid society.					
3.6	The absence of democratic practice and periodic elections represents a challenge to the Christian presence in Gaza.					



## Palestinian Christian Community in the Gaza Strip

3	Indicators of the internal Palestinian situation and its relationship with the Palestinian Christian community in Gaza	Acceptance of the idea		Neutral Zone	How much I reject the idea	
		Strongly agree	Agree	Neutral	Strongly opposed	Opposed
3.7	The absence of official Palestinian policies supporting the Christian presence is a contributing factor to the increase in waves of migration from Gaza.					
3.8	Despite the division, I still insist on staying in Gaza as part of my national identity.					
3.9	The absence of tolerance and coexistence and the emergence of extremist thought are driving the emigration of the Christian presence from Gaza.					
3.10	The continuation of the division and the Gaza government is a negative indicator for me as a Christian citizen living in Gaza.					
3.11	As a Palestinian Christian citizen, I support the involvement of Christians in the political and social life of Gaza.					
3.12	Palestinian parties and factions are not doing enough to strengthen the Christian presence on the political and economic levels.					
3.13	Strengthening the Christian presence in Gaza requires a more active role by the PLO and the Palestinian Authority.					
3.14	The return of power and the end of the division may contribute to the return of many immigrants.					

3	Indicators of the internal Palestinian situation and its relationship with the Palestinian Christian community in Gaza	Acceptance of the idea		Neutral Zone	How much I reject the idea	
		Strongly agree	Agree	Neutral	Strongly opposed	Opposed
3.15	The migration of Christian children from Gaza is not related to the division, but rather to the search for better opportunities and external education.					
3.16	I feel safe in Gaza and I don't have to worry.					

#### 4. Indicators of economic and social conditions, and their relationship to the Palestinian Christian community in Gaza:

4	Indicators of economic and social conditions, and their relationship to the Palestinian Christian community in Gaza.	Acceptance of the idea		Neutral Zone	How much I reject the idea	
		Strongly agree	Agree	Neutral	Strongly opposed	Opposed
4.1	Poor economic conditions are a reason for migration in general from Gaza, not just for the Christian community.					
4.2	Unemployment and the general deterioration of the economic situation make me think about emigrating.					
4.3	Religious institutions help support the steadfastness of Christian citizens in Gaza.					
4.4	Despite the economic challenges, I prefer to stay in Gaza.					
4.5	The warmth of the homeland and the Christian family is a factor that helps to survive in Gaza.					
4.6	Concern about my children's career and economic future is making me think about emigrating.					

## Palestinian Christian Community in the Gaza Strip

4	Indicators of economic and social conditions, and their relationship to the Palestinian Christian community in Gaza.	Acceptance of the idea		Neutral Zone	How much I reject the idea	
		Strongly agree	Agree	Neutral	Strongly opposed	Opposed
4.7	Economic crises are reflected in social relations in the Christian community in Gaza.					
4.8	The Christian community in Gaza is characterized by social cohesion and constant communication.					
4.9	I am thinking of emigrating because of the feeling of alienation in Gaza.					
4.10	I would rather live in the West Bank than stay in Gaza.					
4.11	Ending the division, restoring unity and improving the economic situation may contribute to strengthening the Christian community in Gaza.					
4.12	Willing to allow my children to immigrate temporarily (education, work) and return again.					
4.13	The housing crisis and lack of jobs are the biggest challenges facing the Christian community in Gaza.					
4.14	The Christian community in Gaza is not socially cohesive and suffers from many challenges.					
4.15	High unemployment rates and shrinking economic opportunities are an incentive for Christians to emigrate from Gaza.					
4.16	The Christian community in Gaza is suffering like other groups, and there is no need to worry.					

### 5. The role of religious, cultural and educational institutions in strengthening the Palestinian Christian community in Gaza:

5	Indicators of the role of religious, cultural and educational institutions in strengthening the Palestinian Christian community in Gaza	Acceptance of the idea		Neutral Zone	How much I reject the idea	
		Strongly agree	Agree	Neutral	Strongly opposed	Opposed
5.1	The survival of Christian educational institutions in Gaza is part of the continuity of the Christian community.					
5.2	Christian cultural institutions play a role in supporting and strengthening the Christian community in Gaza.					
5.3	Christian cultural institutions contribute to promoting general culture and raising national belonging among Christian citizens in Gaza.					
5.4	Declining support from religious institutions is helping to increase the waves of Christian migration from Gaza.					
5.5	The challenges of the political and economic situation increase the Christian citizen's dependence on assistance from religious institutions.					
5.6	Supporting the steadfastness of the Christian presence requires more effective interventions by Christian institutions in Gaza.					
5.7	Restrictions on public freedoms pose a challenge to Christian cultural institutions in Gaza.					
5.8	The division and Israeli wars have contributed to reducing the role of Christian cultural and educational institutions in Gaza.					

5	<b>Indicators of the role of religious, cultural and educational institutions in strengthening the Palestinian Christian community in Gaza</b>	<b>Acceptance of the idea</b>		<b>Neutral Zone</b>	<b>How much I reject the idea</b>	
		<b>Strongly agree</b>	<b>Agree</b>	<b>Neutral</b>	<b>Strongly opposed</b>	<b>Opposed</b>
5.9	The decline in the role of Christian cultural institutions in Gaza is linked to lack of funding and financial deficit.					
5.10	Supporting the steadfastness of the Christian presence in Gaza requires greater freedom for cultural institutions and increased financial support.					
5.11	Strengthening the resilience of the Christian community in Gaza requires increasing the effectiveness of the role of cultural, social and religious institutions.					
5.12	There is general satisfaction with the role of Christian institutions in supporting the steadfastness of the Christian presence in Gaza.					
5.13	The existing institutions are sufficient but they are unable to play their role towards the Christian community in Gaza.					
5.14	The restriction of public freedoms in Gaza contributes to the reduction of the role of Christian cultural institutions.					



## 6. Indicators of interest in public issues:

6.1	<b>Your level of knowledge of the political and security situation in Palestine and Gaza:</b>	<input type="checkbox"/> Excellent <input type="checkbox"/> Good <input type="checkbox"/> Average <input type="checkbox"/> Poor <input type="checkbox"/> I have no interest
6.2	<b>Reasons for the increase in waves of Christian migration from Gaza:</b>	<input type="checkbox"/> The deteriorating economic situation <input type="checkbox"/> The political and security situation <input type="checkbox"/> Lack of support from institutions <input type="checkbox"/> Fear and apprehension for my life <input type="checkbox"/> Religious and intellectual extremism <input type="checkbox"/> The division and Israeli wars <input type="checkbox"/> The absence of democratic practice and lack of representation
6.3	From your point of view: How can we confront the increasing migration of the Christian presence from Gaza?	<input type="checkbox"/> Increase political and media support <input type="checkbox"/> Increase awareness of belonging to the homeland <input type="checkbox"/> Financial support and assistance <input type="checkbox"/> End division and restore unity <input type="checkbox"/> Religious and cultural tolerance <input type="checkbox"/> Openness to the local <input type="checkbox"/> Increase the number of cultural and social institutions <input type="checkbox"/> Allocate a share of public jobs in the public sector.
6.4	<b>How do you rate your level of integration into the local, political, cultural and social life in Gaza?</b>	<input type="checkbox"/> Excellent <input type="checkbox"/> Good <input type="checkbox"/> Average <input type="checkbox"/> Poor <input type="checkbox"/> I have no interest
6.5	<b>Your level of satisfaction with the performance of Christian institutions in Gaza in supporting Christians:</b>	<input type="checkbox"/> Excellent <input type="checkbox"/> Good <input type="checkbox"/> Average <input type="checkbox"/> Poor <input type="checkbox"/> I have no interest



Appendix [5]: The internal correspondence of the Ministry of Endowments in Gaza that sparked controversy in the Palestinian street

بِسْمِ اللَّهِ الرَّحْمَنِ الرَّحِيمِ



دولة فلسطين  
وزارة الأوقاف والشئون الدينية  
الإدارة العامة للوعظ والإرشاد

التاريخ: 30 ربيع آخر / 1442 هـ  
الموافق: 2020/12/15 م  
الرقم:  
المرفقات:

الأخ / د. عبد الهادي سعيد الأغا  
وكيل وزارة الأوقاف والشئون الدينية  
السلام عليكم ورحمة الله وبركاته،،،

**الموضوع/ فعاليات الإدارة العامة للوعظ والإرشاد للحد من التفاعل مع الكريسماس**

بداية نسأل الله عز وجل لكم دوام الصحة والعافية، والمعافاة الدائمة في الدين والدنيا والآخرة بإشارة إلى الموضوع أعلاه، جلس الأخوة في الإدارة العامة للوعظ والإرشاد لمناقشة الفعاليات التي يمكن تنفيذها خلال الأسبوعين القادمين، ووصلوا إلى الفعاليات الآتية، مع ذكر الدائرة المنفذة:

1. فتوى (نشرة نعلم، دائرة الوعظ والإرشاد).
2. دعوة إلكترونية
  - نشر بطاقات إلكترونية.
  - نشر مادة فيديو تفاعلية.
  - نشر فتاوى متعلقة بالموضوع.
  - مراسلة بعض الدعاة للحديث عن الموضوع.
3. مخاطبة وزارة الداخلية
4. مخاطبة وزارة الاقتصاد
5. جولة ميدانية دعوية
6. إعداد المادة الدعوية لمخاطبة المعنيين
7. لجنة التحصين المجتمعي
8. الإذاعات المحلية
9. الفضائيات
10. الإعلام

(الإدارة العامة للوعظ، الدعوة المجتمعية).  
(الإدارة العامة للوعظ، الدعوة المجتمعية).  
(الدائرة المجتمعية).  
(الدائرة العلمية).  
(الدكتور عبد الله أبو عليان).  
(الدائرة العلمية).  
(الدائرة العلمية).  
(الإدارة العامة للوعظ والإرشاد).

ملاحظة/ سيتم نشر الفعاليات السابقة على مجموعات: الوعظ، الدعوة العلمية، الدعوة الإلكترونية، العمل التنسيقي.

سائلين المولى عز وجل لنا ولكم التوفيق والسداد،،،

وتفضلوا بقبول فائق الاحترام والتقدير،،،

أخوكم  
د. وليد أحمد عويضة  
مدير عام الإدارة العامة للوعظ والإرشاد



نسخة ليد الملف.

الوعظ  
العملية  
المخطوطات  
العملية  
العملية  
العملية

08-2623121 رقم هاتف: غزة، أنصار،

## Appendix [6]: The statement of the Ministry of Endowments in Gaza to clarify its position on the internal correspondence



دولة فلسطين  
وزارة الأوقاف والشؤون الدينية  
مكتب الوكيل

التاريخ : 4 / جمادى أول / 1442 هـ  
الموافق : 19 / 12 / 2020 م  
الرقم : 1470 - 1 / 33  
المرفقات :

### توضيح حول المراسلة الداخلية الصادرة عن إدارة الوعظ والإرشاد بوزارة الأوقاف والمتعلقة باحتفالات "الكريسماس"

إن وزارة الأوقاف والشؤون الدينية المرجع الرسمي الديني لكل ساكني فلسطين من المسلمين والنصارى وغيرهم، ومنهجنا في الوزارة ينطلق من سماحة الإسلام العظيم، والذي أقر حرية الاعتقاد فقال تعالى: "لا إكراه في الدين"، ومنح أصحاب الديانات المختلفة حق إقامة شعائرهم وإحياء مناسباتهم وفق ضوابط تضمن تحقيق السلم المجتمعي، والتعاون الإنساني والديني، بل أمرت الشريعة بالبر والإحسان إلى غير المسلمين المقيمين بينهم، وحسن التعامل والجوار معهم، فقال تعالى: {لَا يَنْهَاكُمُ اللَّهُ عَنِ الَّذِينَ لَمْ يُقَاتِلُوكُمْ فِي الدِّينِ وَلَمْ يُخْرِجُوكُمْ مِنْ دِيَارِكُمْ أَنْ تَبَرُّوهُمْ وَتُقْسِطُوا إِلَيْهِمْ إِنَّ اللَّهَ يُحِبُّ الْمُقْسِطِينَ} [الممتحنة: 8]

إن النصارى في فلسطين عموماً، وفي قطاع غزة خصوصاً، هم شركاء الوطن والقضية والنضال، وتتمثل معهم أسمى قيم التعايش الإنساني، ونبادلهم المناسبات الاجتماعية، وتربطنا بهم علاقات استراتيجية، ومن حقهم أن يُقيموا احتفالاتهم الدينية الخاصة بهم، ولا يجوز الإساءة لهم أو التضييق عليهم، والحكومة تؤمن إقامتهم لشعائرهم، وتحمي كنائسهم وأماكن احتفالاتهم.

إن الإدارة العامة للوعظ والإرشاد بوزارة الأوقاف من أهم واجباتها التوعية وتذكير الناس بواجباتهم الدينية والاحكام الشرعية للمسلم، وتبئين الأحكام والآداب المتعلقة بعقيدتهم وأخلاقهم وعبادتهم، والضوابط الشرعية الواجب التزامها في حياتهم الاجتماعية ومعاملاتهم اليومية الخاصة والعامة، وتأتي المراسلة التي تداولتها بعض وسائل الإعلام بالأمس في سياق إرشاد المسلمين للأحكام الشرعية المتعلقة بمشاركة المسلمين في المناسبات الدينية لغير المسلمين، وتقليدهم في شعائرهم الخاصة بهم، فالمسلم مأمور باجتنب المخالفات الشرعية في الأعياد الخاصة بالمسلمين، فمن باب أولى أن يجتنبها في أعياد غيرهم. وعليه تؤكد الوزارة وبشكل قطعي لا لبس فيه، أن المراسلة المذكورة أعلاه ليس لها أي علاقة بإقامة النصارى لمناسباتهم واحتفالاتهم وممارسة طقوسهم الدينية وحياتهم العامة.

كما وتدعو الناشطين السياسيين والحقوقيين والإعلاميين إلى المساهمة في تعزيز السلم الأهلي، وعدم تحميل الكلام ما لا يحتمله، وعند وجود لبس حول موقف معين، فيمكنهم التواصل مع الجهات المختصة في الوزارة وفهم أبعاد الموضوع وملابساته؛ لكن جميعاً شركاء في البناء والتعايش ونشر السلم المجتمعي، وخاصة في ظل الظروف الصعبة التي يعيشها قطاع غزة في مواجهة الحصار وجائحة كورونا والانقسام البغيض.

والله موفق والهادي إلى سواء السبيل

د. عبد الهادي سعيد الأفا


وكيل وزارة الأوقاف والشؤون الدينية



غزة - دوار أنصار - بجوار مسجد الشيخ زايد (الكتيبة) 08-2623114 00970594611172  
gaza.wakf@gmail.com www.palwakf.ps



Appendix [7]: A group of posts on social media in response to the statement of the Ministry of Endowments in Gaza regarding Christian holidays.

✓ **Hussein Al Sheikh** حسين الشيخ @HusseinSheikhpl 

قرار منع الاحتفالات باعياد الميلاد في قطاع غزة هو قرار ظلامي لا يمت الى اخلاقيات شعبنا الدينية والوطنية والاجتماعية بصلة. وهو اشاعة للفكر التكفيرى الظلامي ويضرب اسس وحدة شعبنا واحترام العقائد والاديان وحرية الرأي والمعتقد .

Twitter for iPhone · ٤:٥٩ م · ١٩ كانون الأول ٢٠٠٢٠

٦ إعادات تغريد ١٧ تغريدات الاقتباس ٧٥ إعجابات

 **Omar Shaban Ismail** 2m · 

المنشور الصادر عن وزارة الاوقاف بغزة بخصوص احتفالات الكريسماس مخزي و عبث و ينتهك القانون الفلسطيني و يضرب النسيج الاجتماعي و يهدد الوحدة الوطنية . هكذا منشور لا يصدر إلا عن عقلية ضيقة لا ترى في العالم سوى نفسها. ليس من حق أي وزارة ان تصدر هكذا منشور يمس قضايا سيادية. كيف يسمح لهذا العبث أن يحدث؟ و هل اطلعت عليه اللجنة الادارية التي تحكم غزة؟. يجب سحب المنشور فوراً و تنظيم جلسات توعيه لبعض موظفي وزارة الاوقاف عن تاريخ فلسطين و التسامح و السلم الاهلي و دور مسيحيو فلسطين المضى في كل المجالات و الازمان. فلسطين مهد السيد المسيح الذي أمرنا الله أن نحبه. كل عام و مسيحيو فلسطين و العالم كله بالف خير .

...

**Mustafa Ibraheam** 

ساعة واحدة •

حول بيان وزارة الأوقاف واعياد الميلاد  
البحث ليس مرتبط بصحة البيان أو عدم صحته، ما هو مؤكد أن النوايا موجودة  
وفي أكثر من مناسبة هناك رؤية بنفي الآخر من ناحية دينية وهي بالتالي نفيه  
وطنيا، وكان المسيحيين في فلسطين من وطن غير الوطن الذي نعيش فيه  
ونحن نحتفل معهم من باب التضامن، وإدعاء الاخوة والقرباة، كان الاولى  
بالوزارة وقبلها حركة حماس أن تكون أكثر جرأة وهي تحتفل بذكرى انطلاقها ال  
33، والتغييرات السياسية الحاصلة ولا تكتف ببيان نفي لكنها لم تفعل اي شيء  
حتى الآن. ويبدو أن حماس ووزارتها والمشايخ القائمين على الاوقاف التي  
تمتلك جيشا من الدعاة والوعاظ والارشاد الديني والخطباء لا تزال تعمل على  
مشروع ضيق، وبدلا من أن تقوم الاوقاف بواجبها بمواجهة كورونا، وبذل جهد  
أكبر من الذي تم تخصيصه في توعية الناس بخطر اعياد الميلاد، وتبذل جهد  
في مواجهة حالة الخمول الوطني وانهاء الانقسام، وان ترى أبعد من ذلك وما  
تمر به قضيتنا الوطنية ومشروعنا الفلسطيني وحالة التطبيع والتراجع في  
دعم حقوق الفلسطينيين وابتزازهم، والاحتلال والحصار والفرقة وتجزئة الهوية  
وتحويلنا الى مناطق وجماعات هشة ومتصارعة مشغولة بخلاصها الفردي  
وقوتها وهمها اليومي وكى الوعي الوطني وبعيد جغرافي مناطقي ضيق  
وبطابع ديني.

7 تعليقات

Samir Almanama, Haidar Eid و١٩ شخصا آخر

...

**وسام الفقعاوي** 

١ س •

لإخواننا وأصدقائنا وأبناء جلدتنا وأهلنا وأحبتنا وجيراننا  
والمذبوحين من الوريد للوريد المسيحيين.. كل عام وأنتم بخير..  
عيد ميلاد مجيد.. فوعظنا وإرشادنا: أنكم منا ونحن منكم.

١٢ تعليقا

Musheir El-Farra و٤٤ من الأشخاص الآخرين

ΕΚΚΛΗΣΙΑΣΤΙΚΟΝ ΔΙΚΑΣΤΗΡΙΟΝ  
ΕΛΛΗΝΟΡΘΟΔΟΞΟΥ ΠΑΤΡΙΑΡΧΕΙΟΥ  
GAZI  
TAX.KIB.



ECCLESIASTICAL COURT  
OF THE GREEK ORTHODOX PATRIARCHATE  
GAZA  
Po Box.

بطريكية الروم الأرثوذكس بالقدس  
المحكمة الكنائسية البدائية في غزة

Αριθ. Πρωτ: .....

تلفن: 08 - 2818500

هاتف: 08 - 2818019

عدد السجل: .....

بيان توضيحي لمن سمعه الأمر

نحن في مطرانية الروم الأرثوذكس/ الرئاسة الروحية لكنيسة القديس برفيريوس بمدينة غزة نشهد بأن المدعو/ كمال إلياس ترزى ويحمل بطاقة هوية رقم: 922565445 هو شخص ليس له أي علاقة بكنيسة الروم الأرثوذكسية بمدينة غزة أو مدينة القدس، وهو ليس عضواً في الطائفة الأرثوذكسية الخاصة بنا، وأيضاً لا تربطه أي علاقة بالكنيسة، فهو خارج ملتنا ووعيتنا المسيحية الأرثوذكسية، سبق واعتنق الديانة الإسلامية عدة مرات منهم مرة في مسجد عبد الله عزلم بغزة. وأي شخص يحاول أن يخبركم غير ذلك فهو غير صادق.

واقبلوا التحية والتقدير ،،،

صدر في مدينة غزة: اليوم: السبت الموافق: 2023/08/19م



المطران/ ألكسيوس

رئيس المحكمة الكنائسية البدائية

الوكيل البطريكي للروم الأرثوذكس

مدينة غزة

Appendix [8]: A group of photos during the stages of preparing the study





A session evaluating the study with the participation of a number of researchers and interested parties from the Christian community



## كشوف حضور جلسة تقييم دراسة المجتمع الـ...



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### جلسة تقييم دراسة المجتمع المسيحي الفلسطيني في قطاع غزة

التاريخ: 2023/9/21

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16-					













