Palestinian Christians - Myths and Facts

Who are Palestinian Christians?

Palestinian Christians are a vital part of the Christian story—an ancient community rooted in the very places where Jesus lived and taught. Yet today, they are a small and vulnerable population, often unknown or misunderstood by outsiders, including Christians, in the West.

So what is actually true? Who are Palestinian Christians? Where do they come from, and why does it matter that we talk about them?

This primer seeks to separate myth from fact, offering a clearer picture of who this ancient community is and why their presence matters today.

1. Palestinian Christians trace their roots to the time of Jesus.

True. This community traces itself to the time of Jesus and Pentecost (Acts 2). Jesus was a Jewish rabbi born in Bethlehem, which is now a Palestinian city in the Palestinian West Bank. Today, vibrant Palestinian Christian communities still live in the places of Jesus' life and ministry. Over centuries of various rulers and empires, a remnant of these first Christians from Pentecost have remained faithfully present in the land. They include Christians from a variety of traditions and denominations–ranging from Catholic and Orthodox to Presbyterian and Evangelical. Palestinian Christians will often tell you they take pride in passing the faith down from mother to daughter, father to son, under empire after empire, from Jesus' time until today.

2. Palestinian Christians are a disappearing minority.

True. In 1922, 9% of people in the region were Christian. **Today the number is closer to 1%.** In all parts of Palestine/Israel, Palestinian Christians face immense challenges to sustain their way of life. Since Israel's creation in 1948, growing numbers of Christians have fled to more stable countries. This ancient community now lives in fear of extinction,

especially as Gaza has been destroyed and Israeli military and settler violence has increased in the West Bank over the last two years.

3. Muslims are driving Christians out of the Holy Land.

False. The primary reasons for the decline of percentage of Christians in the Holy Land relate to (a) Israeli atrocities against Palestinians, which drive emigration; (b) comparative ease of emigration for Christians; and (c) lower birth rates among Christians.

Historically, Palestinians Christians consistently cite Israel's occupation as the primary reason for leaving, with only a small minority referencing tensions with Muslims as a factor at all. Like all Palestinians, Christians experience violence and economic hardship. But Christians have had a much easier time immigrating, particularly to Europe and the Americas. The genocide in Gaza–in which Israel killed at least 3% of the small Christian population there–and accelerated ethnic cleansing in the West Bank are forcing even more Christians out.

While the Palestinian Christian community teeters on an existential brink today, their numbers began to decline long ago. The most significant early shock came in the Nakba–the years surrounding Israel's creation in 1948 when Israeli militias expelled the majority of indigenous Palestinians, Christian and Muslim, from their homes and blocked their return. Over the last century, Palestinian Christians have created vibrant diaspora communities around the world, particularly in the Americas—in places like Santiago, San Francisco, and Detroit.

Yet many have fought (and fight) to stay. Many view part of their calling as bearing witness in the land of Jesus' ministry. Palestinian Christians and Muslims typically see themselves and each other as fellow Palestinians. While there have been inter-communal tensions—as there are in every society—disputes about civil matters like property ownership are often mischaracterized in the media as primarily religious in nature. While Christians have been persecuted elsewhere in the Middle East, Christian-Muslim relations in Palestinian society have historically been very good. For long stretches before the 20th Century, indigenous Christians, Muslims, and Jews coexisted relatively peacefully in the Holy Land.

The last major factor for the decline of Palestinian Christians is economic and cultural. Palestinian Christian communities trend economically middle class, and have lower birth

rates than Jewish and Muslim counterparts. Some communities, like Bethlehem and Nazareth, have periodically experienced a rise in the total number of Christians. However, the overall trend points to a steep decline in the percentage of Palestinian Christians.

4. The Palestinian Authority is Responsible for Driving Palestinian Christians out of Bethlehem.

False. The oft-cited statistic that Palestinian Authority rule forced Bethlehem's Christian population from 80% to just 12% in 2016 is misleading at best.

The percentage decline incorrectly compares the much larger governorate of Bethlehem—which includes more than 15 towns and villages—with the smaller City of Bethlehem. Most of the towns and villages in Bethlehem's governorate are and have been predominantly Muslim for centuries. Regarding Bethlehem City, 80% of its residents were Christian prior to 1948—not at the time of the establishment of the Palestinian Authority (PA) during the 1990s. By the 1990s, the percentage of the Christian population was closer to 40%, though this is in part due to the growth in the Muslim population. Polls from the past few decades show that the primary reasons for Christian emigration from Bethlehem are related to Israel's ongoing military occupation, not administration by the Palestinian Authority. Rather than a sudden drop after the Palestinian Authority came into power in 1994, these facts show the continuation of a steady decline over decades.

Instead, Christians in the West Bank hold disproportionately high numbers of leadership positions in government and civil society. Despite accounting for approximately 1% of the West Bank's population, Palestinian Christians have founded approximately 40% of NGOs and aid organizations. Under Palestinian law, the mayors of Bethlehem and its surrounding cities (Beit Jala and Beit Sahour) are required to be Christian.

5. The biggest threat to Christians in Gaza is Hamas.

False. While Christians in Gaza have occasionally faced harassment, threats, and attacks, the primary pressure faced by Christians—and all Palestinians in Gaza—has been the Israeli blockade and siege, which cut off Gaza for more than 17 years prior to October 7th. Nevertheless, Christians in Gaza have longed to stay and maintain their life despite the impossible circumstances.

Since October 7, Israel has killed more than 3% of the remaining Christian population in Gaza. Dozens of families who were able to flee have left. The remaining Christian population in Gaza is merely a few hundred people. They were mainly sheltered in two remaining churches, St. Porphyrios Greek Orthodox Church and the Holy Family Catholic Church, and continue to face severe restrictions on food, water, medicine, and fuel. Israel even bombed both churches, killing 17 people in one incident at St. Porphyrios-–the third oldest living church in the world. Israeli atrocities of the past two years are pushing the last bastion of this historic Christian community into extinction.

6. Palestinian Christians are an integral part of Palestinian society.

True. Though their numbers may be small, Palestinian Christians have played an outsized role in shaping Palestinian culture and politics in Israel/Palestine and the diaspora. Palestinian Christians founded 40% of the aid organizations and other NGOs in the occupied territory, and Christian institutions are the third largest employer in the West Bank. Many prominent artists, poets, politicians, and cultural figures are Christian Palestinians. Their presence is integral to Palestinian society and to achieving and sustaining a just peace for all Israelis and Palestinians.

7. Christianity is thriving in Jerusalem and other areas under Israeli control.

False. While life is easier for Palestinian Christians living in Israel than in the West Bank and Gaza because they hold Israeli citizenship (giving them access to certain services, the right to vote, and ease of international travel), they still experience discrimination and live as second-class citizens simply because of their ethnic and religious heritage (2018 Nation-State Law). In Jerusalem, where the decline of Christians is the greatest outside of Gaza, Armenian and Palestinian Christians are often spat on and verbally assaulted by certain extreme elements within Israeli society. Vandals have graffitied several churches with the words, "death to Arabs, death to Christians." And the local Heads of Churches in Jerusalem is sounding that Israel is stripping Christians of their historic properties through unlawful application of tax law and other pressures.

Under the weight of Israeli occupation and settler violence, the Palestinian Christian community says it is facing an existential crisis in the West Bank and East Jerusalem, where Israel maintains ultimate authority as the occupying power. As a result of nearly two

decades of siege and two years of genocidal violence, the historic Christian community in Gaza (which has called Gaza home since at least the 4th century) is nearly extinct.

8. Palestinian Christians can worship freely in the Holy Land.

True and False. Israeli law protects freedom of religion and conscience as well as freedom of speech and expression. Proselytizing one's beliefs, which is core to some religious practice, is restricted in certain circumstances. Some Christians have been arrested for accusations of participating in illegal missionary activity, though most enforcement comes in the form of immigration restrictions and deportation procedures. In January of 2023, the Knesset considered a law that would outlaw all Christian missionary activity in Israel, though it failed to pass.

Under the Palestinian Authority, Palestinian Christians worship and live freely within Palestinian society, often occupying prominent positions in government and civil society.

In Gaza, the centuries-old Christian community has faced harassment and even serious crimes after Hamas' rise to power, including the bombing of the Christian bookstore and the kidnapping and murder of its owner, Rami Ayyad—who was likely targeted because of his faith. Still, most instances of conflict between Muslims and Christians are based on disputes that have nothing to do with religious identity. As polling and research demonstrates, Christians identify the greatest threat to their community and existence as the suffocation under Israeli oppression.

9. Jesus was Palestinian.

True and False. Place names, national and religious identities, and borders worked differently in Jesus' time. The people groups we refer to today of "Israeli" and "Palestinian" do not correspond to the same people groups from Biblical times. The modern, secular nation-state of "Israel" is not Israel of the Bible. And Islam did not yet exist.

Centuries before Jesus' birth, some writers referred to the area as "Palaistinê." By the time of his birth, the region was occupied by the Roman empire and known as the province of Judea, as its people came from the tribe of Judah and worshiped Yahweh, the God of Israel. The Romans officially changed the name to Palestine after the Bar Kokhba revolt in the 2nd century. Before the British occupation after WWI and Israel's founding in 1948, Israel/Palestine was a province of the Ottoman Turkish Empire called Palestine. Many people of all faiths there referred to themselves as Palestinian. "Israeli" and "Palestinian"

identities, which mapped to religious and ethnic identity, emerged mainly surrounding Israel's founding in 1948.

Today, many contemporary Palestinian theologians reference Jesus as Palestinian not as a historical matter, but a theological one. They note that Jesus lived under a military occupation, stood with the suffering, came near to the oppressed, and declared a new "Kingdom" where neighbors and even enemies could live alongside each other and flourish. Identifying Jesus with Palestinian Christian communities offers encouragement that they are seen and known in their suffering by a God who calls them "beloved children" and longs to set them free.

10. It's essential to support the survival of the Christian community in the Holy Land.

True. Christians in the Holy Land are essential threads in the larger fabric of faith in the Holy Land. At its best, the region speaks in its multiplicity of voices and traditions: Jewish, Muslim, Christian, Druze, Dom, and beyond. Despite being less than 1% of the population, Palestinian Christians have an outsized influence, often working in positions of leadership in government, the arts, academia, and business.

Christians have been a part of and directed peacemaking efforts across the region. They often express deep confusion that their brothers and sisters in faith, especially in the U.S., seem to refuse to hear their cries or offer their support for their basic rights and freedoms, rooted in nonviolence and the image of God in all. Instead, they see these communities support policies that degrade their humanity and disguise God's desires for true peace and justice in the region.

To learn more about Palestinian Christians and their stories:

- Follow Red Candle: Light for Palestine, Church at the Crossroads, Kairos Palestine
- Read Christ Under the Rubble by Rev. Munther Isaac
- Watch this keynote by Dr. Lamma Mansour
- Explore the Diyar Consortium and the Bethlehem Institute for Peace and Justice
- Listen and subscribe to Across the Divide Podcast
- Watch and share this mini documentary about Nobel Peace Prize Nominee Elias Chacour