

Palestinian Christians Against the Occupation

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In a recent op-ed in the *Wall Street Journal*, Israeli Ambassador Michael Oren claimed that Christians in Israel are better off than their brethren anywhere else in the Middle East. Two Sundays ago, “60 Minutes” made clear he attempted to intimidate Bob Simon by going over Simon’s head to speak to Jeff Fager, the head of CBS News and executive producer of “60 Minutes,” to complain that Simon’s story on Christian Palestinians was “a hatchet job” against Israel. In fact, it was a hard-hitting, but honest piece in which Simon helped to expose the terrible harm the Israeli occupation — not Muslim Palestinians as the ambassador claimed — is doing to Christian Palestinians in the Holy Land.

I am a Palestinian Christian, now a U.S. citizen, and my own experience and that of my family attest to the falsity of Ambassador Oren’s assertion. I was born in East Jerusalem, Jordan in 1952, only a few years after my family and the majority of Palestinians fled from their homes when the newly established Jewish state took over three-quarters of historical Palestine. My family, like almost all the other Palestinians who fled — Christians and Muslims alike — became refugees, losing their fields, orchards, homes and practically everything else, to Israel. Israel defied the international consensus and a U.N. resolution calling on it to allow the Palestinian refugees to return.

Had Israel allowed the Palestinians to return, it would not have become a majority Jewish state. Israel’s fear of a Palestinian presence within its borders continues to drive its brutal policies of occupation, which victimize Palestinian Christians as well as Muslims. Israel occupied the rest of historical Palestine in 1967, gaining control over a large Palestinian Arab population which many Israelis view as a threat to the “Jewish character” of their country.

There is a simple test of Ambassador Oren’s claims: I say to him, “Mr. Ambassador: If your country is so good to Christians, why don’t you allow me, my family and thousands of Palestinian Christians to return to our homes in the part of Jerusalem which Israel occupied in 1967 or the western part of the city from which Palestinians were forced out in 1948? Why is it that any Jew from any country in the world can claim full rights of citizenship as soon as he or she sets foot in Jerusalem, while I, whose family roots in Jerusalem go back many centuries, am barred from living with full human rights in my hometown?”

Ask Ambassador Oren about the Palestinians who hail from the predominantly Christian villages of Iqrit and Kufr Bir’im which, like the majority of Palestinian Arab villages, were razed to the ground after 1948. Iqrit and Kufr Bir’im are only two of many such Christian villages, but well known because of the long — but unfortunately failed — campaign waged on their behalf by courageous Israeli human rights advocates.

There is no doubt that Arab Christians face problems in the Middle East. The worst examples were during the Lebanese civil war and in the aftermath of the war in Iraq, when political and economic stability collapsed. Israel’s attacks on Lebanon played a major role in destabilizing that country, and Israeli hawks cheered the loudest for the U.S. invasion which destabilized Iraq.

Palestinian Christians are, indeed, worried about the militancy of extremists who cloak themselves in distorted Islamic rhetoric. Yet, the majority of Palestinian Muslims and Christians have chosen peaceful resistance. To say that Hamas is the cause of the declining Christian population in the occupied Palestinian territories is standing the truth on its head.

Our people are fleeing their homeland because the Israelis are confiscating the land of Palestinians — Muslims and Christians alike — to build Jewish-only settlements and the Apartheid Wall which is ghettoizing many Palestinian communities. Palestinian Christians are leaving because of Israeli checkpoints and barriers that severely restrict the freedom of movement of Palestinians, destroying their economy and preventing their access to their holy places in

Jerusalem. They are leaving because Israel diverts Palestinian water resources in a way that gives illegal Jewish settlements the right to enjoy swimming pools while the fields of Palestinian farmers next door go fallow for lack of water.

But Palestinian Christians are speaking for themselves through the Kairos Palestine Document:

“We, a group of Christian Palestinians, after prayer, reflection and an exchange of opinion, cry out from within the suffering in our country, under the Israeli occupation. ... Today, we bear the strength of love rather than that of revenge, a culture of life rather than a culture of death. ... [We] endorse nonviolent resistance based on hope and love that puts an end to evil by walking in the ways of justice.”

There is no difference at all in the degree of suffering that Palestinian Christians and Muslims are experiencing under Israel’s long military occupation. To suggest that Palestinian Christians are doing well under Israeli domination couldn’t be further from the truth.

American Methodists and Presbyterians are increasingly troubled by Israel’s ongoing subjugation of Palestinians — Christians and Muslims alike. Though they have long-standing concerns for the welfare of Israelis, many Methodists and Presbyterians believe the time has come to move beyond words and into actively demonstrating to this right-wing Israeli government that they will not stand aside silently as Israel oppresses generation after generation of Palestinians.

In the days and weeks ahead, both the United Methodist Church and the Presbyterian Church (USA) will consider resolutions to divest themselves from companies — Caterpillar, Motorola Solutions and Hewlett Packard — profiting from Israel’s ongoing occupation of the Palestinian territories.

If they do so, they will be alerting the Israeli government that the occupation will no longer be tolerated as business as usual. Palestinians have the right to live free of Israeli domination. Methodists and Presbyterians alike could send a very strong message to the Israeli and American governments if they move ahead with these sensible resolutions to divest from companies that shamefully benefit from the repression of Palestinians.

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