



America-Eurasia Center's Middle East Program

December 12, 2023

Christmas is Canceled in Bethlehem



*A 2021 Christmas Eve celebration in Bethlehem, Manger Square
Photo Credit: Mahmoud Illean of the Associated Press.*

Nicholas Tocco

The America-Eurasia Center

The Middle East Program

www.EurasiaCenter.org

The America-Eurasia Business Coalition

www.usebc.org

Christmas is Canceled in Bethlehem



Bethlehem's Basilica of the Nativity.

Photo Credit: National Catholic Registry

Christmas is often a time of joy and celebration; a time of feeling warmth and comfort as one is together with their family and closest friends. However, for the Christians of Palestine, the holiday season has been canceled as they are feeling grief and fear in light of the ongoing war between Israel and Hamas, with its Christian leaders wishing to express solidarity with the plight of their Muslim counterparts. These emotions are actually a continuation of the frustration that has been felt by the Christians of Palestine for many decades.

Palestinian Christians are often called the 'living stones' of Christianity as they can trace their history to the birth of the Church in this land 2,000 years ago."¹ Palestinian Christians make up 2% of the overall Palestinian population in the West Bank and less than 1% of the population in Gaza.² These Christians are indigenous to the Holy Land and represent the oldest Christian community on earth. In spite of this, many Christians around the world are unaware of the existence of Christians in Palestine and still view the conflict as a religious war between Muslims

¹ "Palestinian Christians," Palestine Portal, January 20, 2018, <https://www.palestineportal.org/learn-teach/israelpalestine-the-basics/palestinian-christians/>.

² Ishaan Tharoor, "Why Christmas Is Canceled in Bethlehem," The Washington Post, November 29, 2023, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2023/11/29/palestinian-christians-christmas-ceasefire-cancel/>.

and Jews. “The majority are members of Orthodox churches, second most are Roman Catholic, and then Anglican, Lutheran, and other denominations. They enjoy a respected place in Palestinian society, and a status in government, culture and business that belies their tiny percentage of the population.”³ Palestinian Christians strongly identify with the same Palestinian culture as their Muslim counterparts. In fact, Muslims and Christians have lived together in peace for many generations. Today, they both are forced to endure the humiliation of Israeli occupation. “One of the most painful restrictions of the occupation are the limits on their freedom to worship. Tourists from around the world can visit the Church of the Holy Sepulcher in Jerusalem, believed to be the site of Jesus’ burial tomb, yet Palestinian Christians who live only a few miles away cannot reach it without a special permit that they can rarely obtain, even during the Easter season.”⁴

One of the most recent prominent events in the history of Palestinian Christians is the Kairos Palestine Document, which was signed by thousands of Palestinian Christians and supported by all the Heads and Patriarchs of the Jerusalem Churches. The Kairos Palestine Document declares that God does not love one group of people more than another but loves everyone equally. The document discusses the plight of the Christian population as it is declining, despite residing in the place where Christianity was born. The document also condemns Christian Zionism as it poses a threat to the safety of Palestinian Christians and deems the Israeli occupation as a sin against God. “We declare that any theology, seemingly based on the Bible or on faith or on history, that legitimizes the occupation, is far from Christian teachings, because it calls for violence and holy war in the name of God Almighty, subordinating God to temporary human interests, and distorting the divine image in the human beings living under both political and theological justice.”⁵ The Kairos Palestine Document also rejects any claims made by Israel that Palestinian Muslims are the reason that Palestinian Christians choose to leave Palestine, instead stating that it is because of the occupation.⁶

The most recent conflict between Israel and Palestine has now marked yet another phase in the history of the Christians of Palestine. On November 22, leaders of the Palestinian Christian community in the West Bank city of Bethlehem, declared that all Christmas festivities are to be canceled as an act of solidarity with the plight of the fellow Palestinians in Gaza. “There will be no public celebrations, no twinkling Christmas lights and no decorated tree in Manger Square-not as long, they say, as a state of war reigns over the embattled Gaza Strip, and the majority of its residents cope with Israeli bombardments, the devastation of their homes and a spiraling

³ “Palestinian Christians,”

⁴ “Palestinian Christians,”

⁵ “Palestinian Christians,”

⁶ “Palestinian Christians,”

humanitarian crisis.”⁷ Hanna Hananiyah, the Mayor, canceled Christmas celebrations in favor of demonstrations in solidarity with Gaza. “Bethlehem yearly hosts the main Christmas celebrations, including the traditional bishop’s entry to the Nativity Church, which is accompanied by scout bands parades and popular celebrations.”⁸ In Ramallah, the lighting of the Christmas tree, one of the most attended holiday events in Palestine, is canceled. These acts are not to be taken lightly, as for the Palestinian Christian community, who are predominantly located in Ramallah and the West Bank. For the Palestinian Christian community, which is primarily located in Bethlehem and Ramallah, Christmas is the most important event to celebrate their heritage. The cancellation of these celebrations is a means of displaying the mourning and suffering all Palestinians, regardless of faith, have been feeling since the beginning of the war.

There are also many Palestinians, such as Hid Shraideh, who wish to do much more than pray and boycott Christmas and take actions such as raising aid for the people of Gaza, but this is not possible, which many feel is a violation of their right to practice their Christian faith.⁹ The pastor of Bethlehem’s Evangelical Lutheran Christmas Church, Munther Isaac, has described the ongoing conflict as a genocide that has resulted in the displacement of nearly two million people. For Christians in Gaza, they are facing a possible extinction event as there are roughly less than 1,000 Christians in Gaza, with Israeli airstrikes having damaged or destroyed all of the homes of the Christian community in Gaza City, including the oldest active church in Gaza.¹⁰ This church, the Orthodox Saint Porphyrius, is also one of the oldest churches in the world and was targeted in a bombing that killed 18 Palestinians that had been seeking refuge there.¹¹ According to Isaac, the Christian community in Gaza is overwhelmingly homeless. As a result of this, up to 20% of the Christian population in Gaza fled for other parts of the world as they had foreign passports. “Jack Sara, president of Bethlehem Bible College, pointed to how the plight of Palestinian Christians doesn’t seem to be heard by many U.S. evangelicals, who see in muscular Jewish supremacy over the Holy Land a pathway for their own messianic vision.”¹²

In response to all of these tragic events, on the week of November 29th, Isaac was a part of a delegation of Palestinian Christians to persuade the Biden administration, religious leaders, and

⁷ Tharoor, “Why Christmas Is Canceled in Bethlehem,”

⁸ Qassam Muaddi, “Palestinian Christians Cancel Christmas Celebrations to Mourn Gaza Victims,” *The New Arab*, November 23, 2023, <https://www.newarab.com/news/palestinian-christians-cancel-christmas-plans-amid-gaza-war>.

⁹ Muaddi, “Palestinian Christians Cancel Christmas Celebrations to Mourn Gaza Victims,”

¹⁰ Tharoor, “Why Christmas Is Canceled in Bethlehem,”

¹¹ Muaddi, “Palestinian Christians Cancel Christmas Celebrations to Mourn Gaza Victims,”

¹² Tharoor, “Why Christmas Is Canceled in Bethlehem,”

lawmakers in endorsing a total ceasefire. A letter was sent to President Biden, signed by Isaac and his Catholic, Armenian, and Orthodox counterparts from Bethlehem. The letter asks that politicians serve as instruments of God's and that their Christmas wish is for the death and destruction to come to a permanent end.¹³ "The delegation's members condemned Hamas's and deplored its killing of innocent civilians and abduction of hostages. But they questioned Israel's declared intention to wipe out an organization that is part of the fabric of Palestinian society and seen as a standard-bearer of resistance to decades of Israeli military occupation and domination."¹⁴ During this trip to D.C., Munther Isaac and Tamar Haddad, another member of the delegation, did an interview with NPR. During this interview, Isaac stated that it is a scathing indictment of the United States Government to espouse religious freedom while doing nothing to aid in the plight of Palestinian Christians.

Isaac further explained that the Christian Right in the U.S. cares very little for Christians living in the Middle East except for when they are being persecuted by Muslim extremists, but do nothing if they are being persecuted by Jewish extremists.¹⁵ This can be seen in how several Republican lawmakers have been motivated by the ideology of Christian Zionism, in spite of the fact that Palestinian Christians in the West Bank and Jerusalem feel threatened by the actions of Jewish extremists that are passively aided by their far-right government.¹⁶ Haddad described his own experience as a Palestinian Christian in Jerusalem following the outbreak of war, having practically locked himself in his house for a month for fear of being attacked by Israeli settlers. When asked about how the main counterargument to a ceasefire is the fear that Hamas would conduct another attack, Isaac responded with his belief that he accuses Israel of committing genocide because their leaders have stated their intentions to conduct genocide. He feels that Israel's actions go far beyond attempting to eradicate Hamas. Isaac has stated that they have made no efforts to reach out to Hamas due to a lack of direct access but also because of his belief that Hamas ability to gain so much more power is the result of Israel's desire to weaken the Palestinian Authority and keep Palestinians divided. Isaac hoped that his meetings with lawmakers would make them understand that while all of their focus was on Gaza, it was important to remember the raids, checkpoints, mass arrests, and settler violence in the West Bank.¹⁷ Christmas is canceled in Bethlehem yet the larger question to ask is who remains in Gaza to create a future where the wolf will dwell with the lamb, and the leopard will lie down with the young goat, and the calf and the

¹³ Tharoor, "Why Christmas Is Canceled in Bethlehem,"

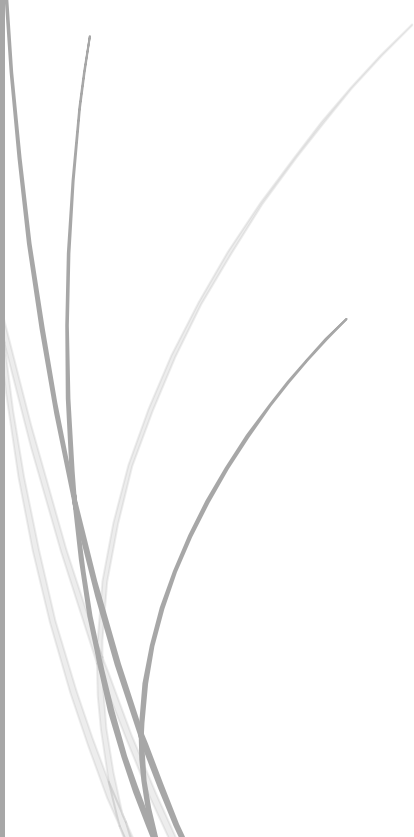
¹⁴ Tharoor, "Why Christmas Is Canceled in Bethlehem,"

¹⁵ Asma Khalid, "Bethlehem, in the Occupied West Bank, Will Skip Christmas Festivities This Year," NPR, December 2, 2023, <https://www.npr.org/2023/12/02/1216716034/bethlehem-in-the-occupied-west-bank-will-skip-christmas-festivities-this-year>.

¹⁶ Tharoor, "Why Christmas Is Canceled in Bethlehem,"

¹⁷ Khalid, "Bethlehem, in the Occupied West Bank, Will Skip Christmas Festivities This Year,"

young lion and the fatling together; and a little boy will lead them. Isaiah 11:6 Will the cycle of violence and retribution ever end? This is the question for the peoples and leaders to ask themselves.



America-Eurasia Center