

A HOLY LAND WITHOUT CHRISTIANS?

Arab Christians are vital to a thriving Middle East—and their numbers are dwindling.

LIKE MANY Palestinians forced from their homes during the 1948 war, relatives of Jordan's Sen. Haifa Najjar carried the keys to their Palestinian homes with them as they fled. These keys, passed down through generations, are powerful symbols of Palestinian ties to the land that international law considers theirs—even as their hope for return wanes.

As a Christian appointed by King Abdullah II to Jordan's upper house of Parliament, Najjar is active in the education, environment, cultural, and legal sectors of the government. She is also superintendent of the Anglican-run Ahliyyah School for Girls and Bishop's School for Boys in Amman, Jordan.

Within the mix of the 500,000 Palestinians who relocated to Jordan because of the Israeli War of Independence—or Nakba, “the catastrophe,” depending on who you ask—was a vocal minority of Palestinian Christians who joined their ranks with the existing Jordanian Christian community. Prior to 1948, Christians accounted for nearly 20 percent of

the population of what is now Israel/Palestine. Today that figure is less than 2 percent. Even more dramatic are declines in the West Bank cities of Ramallah and Bethlehem. Christian populations are nearly extinct in these locations compared to their respective majorities of 90 and 80 percent prior to 1948.*

“They moved not as immigrants; they were initially thinking it was a temporary thing,” says Father Nabil Haddad of the Melkite Catholic Church in Amman. “It is similar to what Syrians are thinking right now when crossing the barbed wire, not the checkpoints, between south Syria and north Jordan.”

Many refugees from the 1948 war were located in UNRWA (United Nations Relief and Works Agency) camps specially dedicated to serving the needs of Palestinian refugees throughout the Middle East. Najjar's mother, who immigrated to Jordan from Palestine before 1948, established the first child care center outside the Zarqa refugee camp to educate the children of Palestinians who had fled the war.

Most of the refugees who arrived in this period ultimately received full Jordanian citizenship—their temporary flight from hostilities became relocation, and the population

* Statistics about the Middle East, not surprisingly, are notoriously political. Stats in this article come from sources as diverse as the U.N. Refugee Agency, the CIA World Factbook, the Middle East Council of Churches, World Vision, and others.

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Below, Sen. Haifa Najjar of Jordan, whose relatives still carry the keys to their former Palestinian homes. At right, Father Nabil Haddad of the Melkite Catholic Church in Amman, Jordan.



Identification of Christian communities as allies of the West has led to persecution.

of Jordan swelled to 1.5 million people by 1950, a full third of them Palestinian refugees.

Memories of this and further immigration during the 1967 Six-Day War persist alongside current headlines on the expansion of Israeli settlements and the removal of Palestinians from the West Bank. A subtext of these headlines is that over the last 100 years, the Christian population throughout the Middle East has fallen precipitously. Christians in the region held steady at 20 percent of the population throughout much of the 19th and early 20th centuries, but today account for less than 5 percent of the total inhabitants.

A ROUNDUP OF Christian populations paints a vivid picture of identity anxiety and flight experienced by Christian communities throughout the Middle East. Coptic Christians, located primarily in Egypt—though many of them don't consider themselves part of the larger Arab Christian community—account for the greatest number of Christians in the region with 8 million followers, down from 10 million two decades ago. Syria ranks second, with nearly 2 million Christians, a 25 percent decline since 1970. Lebanon, with a large Christian majority during the 1920s, now counts Christians as less than 40 percent of its population.

Israel and Iran have seen slight increases in Christian immigrants in recent decades, but rapid declines of Christian populations overall occurred across the region during the same period as anti-Western sentiment grew in the wake of the first and second Gulf wars. Overt identification of Christian communities as allies of the West, such as by the Assyrian Christians in Iraq's Kurdistan region, has led to persecution and the flight of these populations to Iran, Syria, and Jordan. The exodus of Christians from the region, especially to the U.S., the U.K., and Scandinavian countries, accounts for most of the decline in numbers, although another factor is that Christians in the region have lower birth rates than do their Muslim neighbors.

Some insist that the reasons for the mass emigration of Christians from the region are more culturally and politically complex than simply anti-Western attitudes. The December

2012 report "Christianophobia," by the independent British think tank Civitas, includes persecution by Islamic extremists, discriminatory government or religious policies, and anti-Christian sentiments as factors in the exodus. Christian minorities throughout the Middle East are relatively well-educated, thanks to Western institutional presence in the region, and enjoy a proportionally higher income level, better access to education and medical care, and closer ties to relatives outside the region.

A major researcher into the decline of Christian communities in the Middle East is Prince El Hassan bin Talal. The uncle of King Abdullah II of Jordan, he addresses the issue of Christian economic success in an interview with *Middle East Quarterly* by saying that some envy has arisen because Christians have "done well" in the region. Jordan's solution, Prince Hassan says, is to provide parity in human services, such as medical care, social security, and education, so all citizens can enjoy economic and religious freedom with less suspicion toward wealthier Jordanians.

In addition to being prince, Hassan established the Jordanian Royal Institute for Inter-Faith Studies and authored the 1994 book *Christianity in the Arab World*. In the book, Hassan argues that Christians have and ought to continue to play an important role in the Middle East as indigenous communities that have held a place in the region's religious landscape since the founding of Christianity. He maintains that Christians have served as conduits for transmission of some of the best Western ideals into the region, and he says that Christians in Europe and throughout the West should strive to understand the history and contributions of Muslims living among them.

And while Hassan doesn't discount the rise of anti-Christian sentiment as one factor in the exodus of Christians from the Arab world, he also attributes the decline to fragmentation within historical Christian communities as their populations decreased, the relative ease with which Arab Christians—especially those educated in the West—can obtain work visas, and a strong desire for reunification with family and faith communities that are thriving outside the region. For many, he says, the hope they once found in holding the keys to their former

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homes has been replaced by the prospect of a new life beyond the conflict and isolation that many Arab Christians experience.

That doesn't mean that Hassan and others are giving up on the prospect of the retention and growth of Christian communities in the Middle East. The Middle East Council of Churches (MECC), an ecumenical gathering of the many Christian groups in the Arab world, has made efforts at building relationships across denominations to offset the sense of isolation in communities of diminishing size.

Rev. Riad Jarjour, former general secretary of the MECC, wrote a paper, “The Future of Christians in the Arab World,” in which he labels efforts toward Christian unity as “living within the tensions.” Recognizing the strained relationships that exist between the diverse expressions of Christianity in the Middle East, he believes these groups must continue to build connections that bolster Christian Arab identity, even as they cultivate their place as a minority religious community in the region. Others have called for increased Christian-Muslim engagement and cooperation as a solution for expanding, understanding, and maintaining Christian identity in the region.

THE JORDANIAN Interfaith Coexistence Research Center, founded by Father Haddad, is one such organization fostering discussion and cooperation between Christian and Muslim communities. Drawing its guidance from a group of interfaith leaders, Haddad says the establishment of the center and efforts to retain a Christian presence is a necessity of the Christian community.

Calling on the model of Palestinian Christian integration into Jordanian society, Haddad recalls the “fraternal and loving” welcome Palestinian Christians received from their Jordanian brothers and sisters. “We saw that the [Christian] Palestinians were not only accepted, but played an important role in Jordan when it came to industry and education.”

Laws ensuring coexistence within Jordanian society require Christian institutions to provide services to a religiously integrated population. It's what Sen. Najjar calls “the beautiful face of Jordan—the oneness of Jordan as Palestinian, Jordanian, Christian, and Muslim.”

Jordan's constitution also mandates Christian representation in the popularly elected lower chamber of Parliament. With the king's consistent appointment of Christian senators to the upper chamber, Jordan is an exception in the Middle East. It is a model that many hope will flow throughout the region.

Hassan says the main tenet of an inclusionist policy for Christians in the Arab world includes “a recognition that the rights of every member of the community must be respected,” including proportional representation in government and civic life. Some countries in the region have offered social equality and freedom of religious expression for Christians, but Jordan, Hassan proudly states, offers a disproportionately high percentage of parliamentary representation to Christians. Lebanon is the only other Middle Eastern nation that guarantees parliamentary positions to religious groups, and does so proportionally based on total population.

ONE DIFFICULTY WITH these proportions is that they are changing rapidly as populations move out of the region and, in the wake of the Arab Spring and other reform movements, a new wave of internally displaced persons has been created within the Middle East.

Although Jordan halted the flow of Palestinian refugees after 1967 in an effort to discourage Israel from the mass expulsion of Palestinians, it continues to be a haven for refugees from Iraq and Syria. But unlike in 1948, Jordan does not feel its economic or social structure, intended to support a population of 6.5 million, can accommodate such a huge influx of refugees and is looking for help from Western nations to resettle them.

As of January 2013, the U.N. reports 450,000 Iraqis living in Jordan. Since early 2012, an equal number of Syrians have sought refuge in Jordan through official channels, with up to 3,000 more entering *each day* as the conflict continues. Unofficially, it is anticipated that undocumented Syrian immigrants in Jordan, those “crossing the barbed wire,” may include an additional 500,000 persons.



Heather Wilson

J. Martin Bailey, co-author of *Who Are the Christians in the Middle East?* with Betty Jane Bailey, has watched the region as conflicts have especially decimated Christian communities. “The departure of Christians from Iraq was really sad,” he says. “Under Saddam Hussein, a bit like [under] President Assad in Syria, Christians were essentially protected.”

While not endorsing these leaders, Bailey notes that the protection of minority Christian communities ended with the ouster or weakening of these regimes. When new leaders whose political motivations and power base are rooted in Islam either take over the government or become a strong opposition to the secular government, Christians in these countries are no longer a favored minority, courted for their political importance in the international community. Left without political safeguards, Christians are increasingly looking for ways out of these troubled lands.

Haddad praises the Jordanian government and religious institutions, both Muslim and Christian, for the relief offered to Syrian refugees, but warns that Christians must not only seek to help Christian refugees. “The best thing we can do for Syrian Christians is to help all Syrians,” he says. “When I protect all Syrians, I protect the [Syrian] Christians.”

The future of Christianity in the Arab world is in this spirit of cooperation, in which common needs are met through both civic and religious collaboration. Haddad hopes people outside the Arab world can see Islam as he does: as an important part of a multireligious society.

“I need them and they need me,” he says when speaking on the necessity of Christians in the Middle East. “When they talk about a tolerant Islam, who's going to believe this talk if I am not there—not only existing, but present in my original vibrant nature as an Arab Christian?” ■

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