



"Christian Presence and Heritage in Jerusalem - Present and Future"

March 29, 2022

On Tuesday, March 29, 2022, at the Legacy Hotel in Jerusalem, PASSIA held a roundtable discussion on the challenges facing Christian Palestinians in Jerusalem. The main speakers were **Joseph Hazboun, Regional Director of Pontifical Mission in Jerusalem** and **Dr. Usama Salman, Researcher on Christian Waqf and Christian Affairs and Director of the San Vincent Association**. Opening remarks were given by **Founder and Head of PASSIA, Dr. Mahdi Abdul Hadi**. The round table related to the larger, joint project entitled “Protecting Islamic and Christian Cultural Heritage in Jerusalem” and funded by the European Union.

Opening Remarks by Dr. Mahdi Abdul Hadi

In his opening remarks, Dr. Mahdi Abdul Hadi highlighted the importance of Palestinian Christians to Palestinian society. He drew upon the historical example of Umar ibn al-Khattab's covenant with the Christians of Jerusalem made after the Islamic conquest of the city. Muslim Historians attribute to Umar ibn al-Khattab a statement of assurance to the Christians of Jerusalem. He reportedly assured the protection of Christian property, churches, and rituals. Dr. Abdul Hadi used this historical pact to underscore the importance of and historical precedence for respectful relationships between Palestinian Muslims and Christians. Dr. Abdul Hadi stated that it was thus Muslim and Christians’ “responsibility to work together” today in order to address the shared threat of the overpowering, exclusivity of the Zionist Jewish narrative imposed by the occupation. He called upon Muslim and Christian Palestinians to work together in order to “defend, preserve, and maintain our presence in Jerusalem.”

Remarks by Joseph Hazboun, Regional Director of Pontifical Mission in Jerusalem

Joseph Hazboun opened his lecture with vignettes of challenges faced by Palestinian Christians. One challenge Palestinian youth may face are probing questions from Palestinian Muslims who have little exposure to Palestinians from non-Muslim backgrounds. Palestinian Christian youth, if treated as outsiders, may feel pushed away or isolated from their peers. Similarly, Christian Palestinian youth are heavily affected by the fact that their schoolbooks rarely incorporate their history into Palestinian history. Rather, they treat Christianity as a foreign imposition from the Crusaders or European missionaries, despite its deep roots in Palestine. When history books only focus on the connections between Palestinians, Arabs, and the Islamic conquest, the Palestinian Christian struggles to learn their history and thus does not feel as connected to the land. These difficulties contribute to isolation or brain drain among the Palestinian Christian community.

Mr. Hazboun further highlighted the many ways in which Christians have contributed to Palestinian society and have deep historical roots in Palestine. He briefly and expertly touched upon the long history of Christians in Palestine. This history includes the early life of Jesus Christ, important religious sites established by Emperor Constantine's mother Helena, Byzantine and Crusader architecture and art, the creation of music institutions, investment in education, and pioneering Palestinian activist figures from across the centuries. However, despite the illustrious past of Palestinian Christians, Mr. Hazboun is concerned that "the future is bleak" due to the occupation's increased pressure on Jerusalemites. There are also growing attacks on Christian institutions, such as attempts to expand onto Christian land on the Mount of Olives.

Regarding solutions, Mr. Hazboun called upon Christian communities to address the problems on all fronts: to take care of the material, tangible needs of Jerusalemite Christian youth such as housing and jobs while also investing in identity and belonging for Palestinian Christians. Some ways to do this could be to create a center for strategic investment in the Old City that focuses on youth, to support existing organizations such as the Scout Movements, to create better sports facilities, to renovate existing cultural facilities, and to produce more academic materials on Palestinian history that can be distributed in Arabic to promote a stronger relationship among Palestinian Christians and their homeland.

Remarks by Dr. Usama Salman, Director of the San Vincent Association

Dr. Usama Salman presented detailed information regarding the situation of Jerusalemite Christians. There are 13 official Christian denominations, but only 9,000 Palestinian Christians within Jerusalem. This amounts to less than 1% of the population in Jerusalem. In all of Palestine, there are only 150,000 Christians left. Dr. Salman used this information to call for the creation of a strategic plan in order to "strengthen the Christian presence in Jerusalem." In order to preserve the Christian presence, he recommended that the Christian community assess its strengths and weaknesses. In terms of strengths, Christians are overrepresented in land ownership in the old city. 1/3 of the old city is owned by church denominations, with over 900 homes and 500 commercial shops under Christian ownership. Within the old city there are also 76 churches, shrines, monasteries, and convents, while outside of the old city there are 77. Christians also host a multitude of social organizations, development institutions, educational centers, cultural centers, sports clubs, philosophy and bible institutes, and libraries.

Despite these strengths, Dr. Salman did point out weaknesses in the Christian community, including the lack of fact-based decision making. He called for a collective vision, mission, and strategic plan within the community that would align available resources and take advantage of available opportunities. He says that Palestinian Christian Jerusalemites must ask themselves "What actions might help the local Christian community in Jerusalem in order to preserve a strong Christian identity?" and use the answers to build solutions. He ended with a reminder that the church is powerful and should be thinking strategically about the existence of the Christians in the holy land."

Contributions from Roundtable Attendees

Many honorable members of the audience voiced support for the suggestions of Dr. Salman and Mr. Hazboun. Common sentiments across the board included increasing awareness of Palestinian Christian's history, providing opportunities so that Palestinian Christian youth are encouraged not to emigrate, creating a strategic plan that would support cooperative activities across multiple Christian denominations, reducing the knowledge gap between Muslim and Christian Palestinian communities at the grassroots level in order to preserve the heritage of both groups in the face of occupation.

The first follow up remarks were made by Auxiliary Bishop of the Latin Patriarchate of Jerusalem, William Shomali. He lamented that there are Palestinian Christians who do not understand why they are Christians. It is integral that the Palestinian Christian community should "be aware of who we are and what we should do." He also recommended a forward-facing mentality for the Christian community's efforts. He stated, "We shouldn't live with nostalgia only about the past...It is no more. Realistically we have to acknowledge there is a new situation with which we have to cope." In moving forward, Mgr. Shomali cautioned the Palestinian Christian community against two risks: a complex of inferiority due to the occupation or a complex of superiority due to the past. Rather, he called on Palestinian Christians to not become isolated "in our schools, in our monasteries, or in our past" but instead to build a "consciousness and awareness" among Palestinians of their important presence in the Holy Land. This requires Palestinian Christian communities to work together. Instead of each of the 13 communities creating their own institutions, he suggested that they collectively "should work together for the benefit of the Palestinian community and not everyone work for his own account." Mgr. Shomali further spoke against the negative effects of the occupation on youth brain drain. He held that "As long as there is occupation, there is a risk that many of our youth will feel the temptation to leave the country. So, our survival depends on the political situation...Any negotiation for the future of the holy land should involve Palestinians with their two lungs: Palestinian Christians and Muslims. One half cannot breathe alone."

Historian Mohammad Al-Alami contributed two points. First, he alerted the audience of the fact that Christian history in Jerusalem could also be researched using Islamic sources. For example, he had conducted research on Christians in Jerusalem via Shariah Court Documents. Second, Mr. Al-Almi raised personal concerns with what he views as the changing morality in Palestinian Christian society due to the emphasis on values from media rather than from religious figures.

Bishop Emeritus of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Jordan and the Holy Land, Dr. Munib Younan, echoed the importance of researching and distributing information regarding the importance of Palestinian Christians in Jerusalem. He suggested that a center for the study of Palestinian Christian be created so as to allow Palestinian Christians to learn their history. The churches could work together to develop a curriculum on this topic rather than wait for the Palestinian Authority to do so. In addition to recommending harmony across Christian denominations, he also iterated the importance of harmony between grassroots Muslim and

Christian communities, where he worries that great ignorance is still a problem that needs to be addressed.

A woman from the Christian community, Nora Kort, iterated the importance of lessening ignorance of the “other” at the grassroots level. She highlights the fact that Palestinian Christians are often erased from Palestinian media, which increases ignorance. Furthermore, she argues that the church should involve Palestinian Christian women more in the decision making so that they can help lead the way in educating the youth on these topics.

Another member of the Palestinian Christian community, Lawyer Nabil Izhiman, echoed the concern regarding the isolation of Christians from the rest of the Palestinian community. Rather than exist in “ghettos”, Christians must be treated as part of Palestine. This is something that can occur at the school level. However, he is further concerned about the quality of education for children today. He recommended that children need to be given the “tools to become humans, not just engineers and doctors.”

The Director of the St. George School, Richard Zananir, also emphasized the importance of investing in the Palestinian Christian identity through reminding the youth of their rootedness in this land. The current generation, he feels, would benefit from a curriculum that emphasize the Palestinian identity as including Palestinian Christians.

Overall, the roundtable attendees and speakers emphasized the need for increased communication among different denominations of the Christian Community in order to build a strategic plan for the future of Palestinian Christian Jerusalemites.