

## The Dwindling Number of Palestinian Christians in the Holy Land

It is obvious that Palestinian Christians are slowly being forced out of their homeland, based on our observations and conversations made during a month long stay in Bethlehem, Palestine this past summer. Racist, Israeli policies that put pressure on all Palestinians, living under a brutal military occupation, are not intuitively obvious to the average, casual pilgrim to the Holy Land. In fact, here in America, Christians have been conditioned to believe that going into Palestine is dangerous. We found the opposite to be true. Jonathan Cook, a citizen of Israel, explains what's happening to Palestinian Christians in Bethlehem, in his insightful article posted below. We highly recommend contacting the [Holy Land Trust](#) in Bethlehem to go, visit and see for yourself what's happening to our brothers and sisters-in Christ and Muslim friends in Palestine. [Ed.-TEC]



The Banksy Walled Off Hotel sits on the Bethlehem side of the Israeli Separation/Apartheid wall. Everything about it makes a political statement against the brutal Israeli occupation of Palestine.



One of WHTT directors visited the Walled Off Hotel in Bethlehem.

[Why there are few Christians left in the holy town of Bethlehem](#)

Jonathan Cook, 25 December 2017, The National

It is another anxious Christmas for the inhabitants of Bethlehem. This is the time of year when they have a chance to break out of an isolation enforced in concrete since Israel enclosed the town with a 'separation wall' more than a decade ago.

On Christmas Eve, in a centuries-old tradition, Palestinian and foreign pilgrims rub shoulders as they throng into the ancient Church of the Nativity to celebrate the anniversary of the birth of Jesus at its reputed location two millennia ago.

Outside, in Manger Square, the lights and baubles on a huge Christmas tree provide some festive glitz, while hawkers assail the tourists, exploiting the chance to sell them Santa hats and stocking fillers of plastic light sabres and illuminated spinning tops.

Most of the foreign pilgrims enter Bethlehem by coach through a gate in the wall heavily policed by Israeli soldiers. They disembark at the church's entrance and most depart for Jerusalem as soon as the event is over.

Nowadays few tourists get to meet or talk to a Palestinian in Bethlehem. Earlier this year, Israel tried to further choke off tourism

revenue by warning travel agencies that their groups must not stay overnight in Bethlehem's handful of cheap hotels.

Largely sealed off from the world, Bethlehem is today almost as well-known for its graffiti, visible from coaches on the pilgrim trail through the wall, as the nativity. Amid iconic images by Banksy, the famous British street artist, is the handiwork of local paint-sprayers. One message to the world scrawled across the eight-metre-high grey slabs announces: 'Merry Christmas from Bethlehem ghetto?.'

The town now has access to little more than a tenth of its original territory, with homes cut off from farmland, water sources and historic landmarks. A host of ever-expanding Jewish settlements around Bethlehem have been gorging on the rich pickings of their imprisoned neighbours.

Bethlehem's despondency was heightened this month by the decision of US President Donald Trump to recognise Jerusalem as the capital of Israel. That declaration has sparked repeated clashes between Bethlehem's youth and Israeli occupation forces.

Traditionally, the fates of these cities, the two primary destinations for pilgrims, were intimately tied. Before the construction of the wall, they were only a short drive apart. Now Jerusalem is almost unreachable for Bethlehem's inhabitants, while Bethlehem itself has become an increasingly unappealing prospect for most outsiders.

Amid the gloom, however, there were two small tidings of joy this month.

Banksy, who earlier this year established a graffiti-themed hotel called the Walled Off Hotel 'boasting the 'worst view in the world?' put on an alternative nativity play for local children in the shadow of the wall and its armed watch-towers. A two-part BBC documentary shown last week about the planning and staging of *The Alternativity* gave international audiences a rare up-close view of life in the Bethlehem ghetto.

The other success was a screening this month on Capitol Hill of Leila Sansour's documentary *Open Bethlehem*. Along with their invite, US Congress members were sent a 'Bethlehem passport', making them honorary citizens of the town.

Ms Sansour's film was meant to prick consciences. It charts Bethlehem's gradual incarceration and the decision of her own extended family to desert the town, like many other Christians, for opportunities abroad.

Today, Bethlehem's Christians make up only 13 per cent of its population and more than three-quarters blame Israel's blockade for the exodus. The *Open Bethlehem* campaign, spawned by the film, quotes James Zogby, president of the Arab American Institute, saying: 'While every Christmas we sing of Bethlehem, most Americans know so little about the town and its people.'

In the only way they could, Bethlehem's church leaders exacted a small revenge for Mr Trump's Jerusalem declaration. They closed their doors to Mike Pence, the US vice-president and a pious Christian evangelical. His pre-Christmas visit to the region has now been postponed until next year.

Paradoxically, Mr Pence had originally intended to use the trip to highlight the persecution of Christians in the Middle East 'though presumably not the kind of persecution represented by Israel's wall.

Most Palestinian Christians see Mr Pence not as a potential saviour but very much at the heart of their problems. The vice-president is viewed as the latest personification of a Western evangelical tradition that has consistently betrayed Palestine's Christian community.

Exactly a century ago, it was British government leaders like David Lloyd George and Arthur Balfour, men of deep Christian conviction, who prioritised the interests of European Jews over the Holy Land's native Palestinians. The Balfour Declaration set in train a process of colonisation that dispossessed Muslims and Christians alike of their homeland.

Fast forward to today and tens of millions of evangelicals in the US, Israel's new patron, helped to elect Mr Trump. They were the reason he selected Mr Pence as his running mate and why he cynically transformed the incendiary site of Jerusalem into a campaign vote-winner.

The priorities of Christians like Mr Pence derive not from natural justice, solidarity with fellow Christians or even cold calculation, but from supposed divine prophecy. They interpret the Bible as requiring a return of God's chosen people, the Jews, to the Promised Land as a way to bring forward the end-time. In a cataclysmic Battle of Armageddon, Jesus will return, they believe. The truly faithful will rise to heaven to be with God while everyone else, including unrepentant Jews, will burn for eternity.

For this reason, a strong Israel ? one that includes the Biblical lands on which the illegal Jewish settlements are built ? is a central concern for millions of US evangelicals. In contrast, the slow erasure of Palestinian Christians, as well as the heritage and faith they have preserved in the region for 2,000 years, is of little consequence.

Israel's prime minister Benjamin Netanyahu has gleefully exploited his ties to the powerful US evangelical lobby, happy that it dramatically increases his clout in Washington.

Anton Salman, a Palestinian Christian who recently became Bethlehem's mayor, wrote in exasperation of these fellow Christians: ?No church worthy of its name should offer a theological smokescreen for the denial of our most basic rights as Palestinians.?

In Bethlehem, there may soon be few Palestinian Christians left to protect its holy sites, preserve its rituals and liturgy or conduct the nativity celebration itself. And irony of ironies, it will have been fellow Christians who helped to harry this community to extinction.