

Arab Christians Take Hard Line on Israel

Many non-Jews who profess Jesus as Messiah take an unpopular view that contradicts U.S. policy

In today's post-Sept. 11 News environment, U.S. politicians are grappling with an age-old dilemma of how to promote peace between Palestinians and Israelis. Mediation efforts in the Middle East are not new endeavors, but they are running in a higher gear after the terrorist attacks on New York and Washington killed thousands of Americans.

And as always, at the core of the peace negotiations is the central question: Just whose Holy Land is it, anyway?

Charisma surveyed several leaders in the Middle East, asking Messianic Jews, Arab Christians, and Palestinian and Egyptian Christians for their personal views on current events since Sept. 11 and what effect they have had on claims to the Holy Land. Their responses were wide and varied.

"The International Christian Embassy Jerusalem [ICEJ] recognizes that the United States of America is now facing the same sort of terror that Israel has been subjected to for years," said Malcolm Hedding, executive director of the ICEJ. "The fundamentalist Islamic groups known as Hamas, Hizbullah, the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine, and Islamic Jihad have all publicly and without apology stated that their goal is the total destruction of the Jewish state.

"These are not freedom fighters but terrorists, and in the end they will not hesitate to employ the most barbaric methods to

achieve their goal," Hedding told Charisma. "The attack on the World Trade Center in New York demonstrates this fully. Sadly, but not well-known, is the fact that the PLO has yet to remove the clauses that call for the total destruction of Israel from its charter."

Hedding, a native of South Africa, is an ordained minister with the Assemblies of God of South Africa. After planting churches there for 27 years, he assumed his ICEJ post in 2001.

"Nowhere in the Quran does it mention a commitment to peace," Hedding said. "The orthodox original form of Islam that swept out of the Arabian Peninsula in the seventh century under Muhammad's leadership was as violent as that which we see today."

"Christians in the United States should recognize that the Quran repeatedly calls for the murder and destruction of Jews and Christians and that while there may be moderate Muslims, Islam is not moderate or peace-loving."

Ehab El Kharrat, an Egyptian Christian in Cairo, disagrees that God is on Israel's side.

"Nobody has any right to kill civilians, even in occupied land," El Kharrat told Charisma. "However, Israel does occupy a land that belongs to Palestinians. The United Nations and all U.S. administrations admit that the West Bank and Gaza belong to the Palestinians."

"You cannot call all Palestinian militant groups terrorists. The PLO has long denounced all violence against civilians, and they do refrain from such attacks."

El Kharrat also noted that Israeli leaders such as Shimon Peres, Menachem Begin and Yitzhak Rabin admitted they had taken part in attacks on civilians before the declaration of independence in Israel in 1948. Current Prime Minister Ariel Sharon's involvement in massacres of Palestinians and Arabs at Sabra and Shatilla during Israel's 1982 invasion of Lebanon are well-documented.

El Kharrat, who is a full-time member of the senior leadership team at the 6,000-member Kasr El Dohara (Coptic Evangelical Church) in Cairo, holds a viewpoint common among many Christian Arabs, Palestinians and Egyptians in the Middle East that disputes the belief that God has ordained control of the Holy Land to modern-day Jews.

"The Bible, both Old and New Testaments, does not give any right to the Jews to occupy other peoples' land," he said. "From the biblical point of view, true Jews are all those who submit to God and receive His approval and praise. Those Jews who reject the Son of God are free to culturally call themselves Jews, but biblically they are not."

Salim Munayer, a Palestinian Christian living in Jerusalem whose ministry, Musalaha, promotes reconciliation between Jews and Palestinians, told Charisma he is not opposed to Israel's existence. He said the Arab world's grievance against U.S. support for Israel is based on the West's neglect and indifference to Palestinians' lives, aspirations and rights.

"This by no means justifies bin Laden's attacks, yet apart from him this is a legitimate issue that Palestinians have been questioning for years," Munayer told Charisma. "I think Christians should support Israel when it is right. As a true

friend, they should correct Israel's policy when it is wrong. As true friends, we should be honest and truthful to biblical principles."

Munayer says a major problem for Islamic countries is their inability to keep pace with an increasingly modernized world. This causes a climate of frustration in the poorer countries that enables militant Islam to flourish.

Instead of targeting countries for supporting terrorism, the United States should invoke a type of Marshall Plan—which helped Europe rebuild after World War II—to help nations reach modernity by "dealing with the gap between rich and poor, building freedom of religion and expression," he said.

According to Israel's Central Bureau of Statistics, there are 137,000 Christians living in Israel today, and the majority of them—some 115,000—are Arab. The majority of the Christian population resides in northern Israel.

Messianic Jews say U.S. support for Israel is not only the correct political choice, but also the correct biblical choice, said Amir Tsarfari, a Jew born in Jerusalem who uses his German- and English-language skills to serve as a tour guide in Israel.

Tsarfari cited Psalm 83 in explaining his view that Islam is seeking global expansion and the annihilation of the state of Israel. "America should understand that there are two things that drive Islam—destroying anything that belongs to the real God—the God of Israel—and anything that stands in their way to do so," he told Charisma.

Asked about President Bush's stance that Islam is a peaceful religion, Tsatfari said: "We should reach out to Muslims as lost people but not accept their religion as a peace-loving one." America, he said, can only enjoy the blessing of God if it will support the seed of Abraham, which he said is Israel. He cited Genesis 12:2.

Baruch Maoz, an American-born Jewish Christian, pastors Grace and Truth Christian Congregation in Rishon LeTzion southeast of Tel Aviv.

Asked what America's next target against terrorism should be, Maoz replied: "Its own national sin," calling Christians in the United States to a new standard of holiness.

Billy Bruce