

Why a Growing Number of Christians Are Fighting to Protect Israel

Some 20 years ago on a parade ground in central Israel, a class of graduating junior officers marched proudly to accept their lieutenant bars. The parents of those graduating watched proudly from a reviewing stand as the new commanders were sworn in. There were also quite a lot of journalists in attendance, for this wasn't the routine ceremony. One of the officer's candidates being commissioned that sunny spring day was Caroline Kharman, a resident of a village in the hills of northern Israel who just happened to be the first Christian woman to become an officer in the Israel Defense Forces. Kharman, who wore a shiny gold cross around her neck, proudly proclaimed, "I feel I can't fight for my rights without fulfilling my obligations. It's my moral duty to serve my country."

There are approximately 170,000 Christian citizens in Israel—roughly 2 percent of the country's population—and they encompass a multitude of different church affiliations, including Greek Catholics, Greek Orthodox, Roman Catholics, Maronites, Armenians, Copts, Assyrians and Protestants. Christians are not conscripted into the Israeli Defense Forces (IDF), but increasingly army-age Christian 18-year-old men and women have found themselves determined to fulfill their national responsibilities and to serve. All are fluent Arabic speakers and these highly-motivated volunteers serve in combat units, as liaison officers and in the Border Guards.

The Christian community in Israel is thriving. Democracy, freedom of religion and speech, as well as a booming economy, has provided this minority with a sense of belonging inside the Jewish State. And that sense of being integrated into

Israeli society has been threatened by conflict inside Israel's borders and outside. The violence of the last 20 years, including a bloody Palestinian suicide bombing offensive and a war with the terrorist Hezbollah organization in Lebanon, prompted a sharp increase in the number of Christians volunteering for military service. In 2012, a Greek-Orthodox priest named Father Gabriel Nadaf founded a group that works toward more young Christian Israelis joining the IDF.

The opposite, though, is happening inside the Palestinian Authority. For centuries, ever since Mohammed's armies brought Islam to the entire region, the Christians in Levant were subjected to Muslim rule. The Christians were known as *dhimmis*, or protected persons, under Ottoman Rule, although in most cases that meant that the Christians were nothing more than second-class citizens. Christian Palestinians, primarily Greek Orthodox community, were prominent leaders of the various terrorist organizations that fought Israel since the 1970s. Many claimed that these Christians felt a need to display they were every bit as dedicated to the Palestinian cause, and its war against Israel, as the Muslims. But when the Oslo Peace Accords ushered in the autonomous Palestinian Authority in 1994, there was hope that Christians would be considered equals inside the newly established entity and could possibly serve as a bridge toward rapprochement.

Dreams soon evaporated, especially as Palestinian Authority Chairman, Yasser Arafat consolidated his power turning the areas under his control into nothing more than a mafia-like fiefdom. Islamist fundamentalist groups like Hamas and the Islamic Jihad, supported by Iran and the Gulf Arab states, have waged a holy war defined by suicide bombing and stabbing attacks in order to create an Islamic State in Palestine. There was no room for a Christian minority in this Jihad-inspired campaign. To many Christians inside the Palestinian Authority, their future is grim. Many have migrated to the

European Union, to Canada and the United States, and as far away as Australia. Today, according to sources, there are only 40,000 Christians remaining inside the West Bank and the Gaza Strip. Christians were once the majority in Bethlehem. It is believed now that they constitute no more than 20 percent of the population. The same is true for Ramallah, once a thriving city for Christians that is now the seat of the Palestinian Authority.

One reason for the dwindling Christian population is a Palestinian campaign of unadulterated abuse and discrimination. According to the Gatestone Institute, the policy of human rights violations against the Christian minority is institutionalized. The Palestinian Authority's constitution has declared that Sharia, or Islamic law, will rule all legislation; Christian land owners are not protected in local courts or in business disputes, and taxation discrimination severely hampers Christian-run businesses. More than a dozen different Palestinian Authority security services enforce these policies, which do not protect the civil rights of these supposedly safeguarded minority communities. As such, money has been extorted, land and property confiscated and many hesitate to complain out of fear and intimidation.

The official campaign of harassment has escalated into state-sanctioned assault. There are reports of sexual abuse and even rape targeting Christian women, and many more incidents that are never reported at all. Christian girls have been subjected to forced marriages and even ordered to wear the *hijab*. Christian gravestones have been overturned. Churches have been vandalized.

Remarkably, the enforcers of these abominable efforts targeting Christians, the Palestinian security services, have received billions of dollars in United States and European Union aid. There have already been calls in the congress to cut off all funding until the Palestinian Authority cuts any and all ties to terrorist organizations that infest their

communities. Half of the money donated to the Palestinian Authority in 2016, close to \$344 million, paid for the salaries of terrorists behind bars in Israel, as well as to the surviving family members of suicide bombers. The Taylor Force Act, named for a young American student who was stabbed to death in a terrorist attack in Israel, has been gaining support in Congress and will likely be signed into law in December. The Act seeks to deduct the amounts that the Palestinian Authority pays to its imprisoned terrorists from any American foreign aid to the Palestinians.

Accordingly, it is imperative that any measure to limit or end aid to the Palestinian Authority must also demand that the senseless policies of discrimination against the Christian population come to an immediate end. It is inconceivable and unacceptable that Christians are being systematically abused and forced out of the land that is the very birthplace of the Bible.

Until lawmakers in the United States and Europe realign their moral compasses and leverage their generous bundles of aid money to the Palestinian Authority to safeguard the Christian population, the young volunteers to the Israel Defense Forces who proudly and openly wear crosses around their necks alongside their dog tags will be the only ones fighting to preserve the history of Christianity in the region, as well as its hope for survival. {eo}

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