

Christmas in Bethlehem

Controlled by militant Muslims, the place of Jesus' birth is a danger zone for Christians today. But Arab believers say the gospel continues to be preached there.

Rami Ayyad was closing up at the Bible Society in Gaza where he worked when armed men whisked him into a car and sped away. For hours, Ayyad's whereabouts were unknown. Pauline, his wife and the mother of their three children-the last still *in utero*-finally got through to him on his cell phone.

He wasn't able to say much, and she could tell something was wrong. It turned out to be the couple's last conversation.

The next day, October 7, 2007, Ayyad's body was found marred by signs of torture and riddled with the gunshot wounds that killed him.

Hanna Massad, pastor of the Gaza Baptist Church-the only evangelical church in the Gaza Strip-said Ayyad was the first known martyr in Gaza and most likely was killed for refusing to convert to Islam.

Massad shepherded a small flock of 200 or fewer believers amid a sea of some 1.6 million Muslims on the narrow coastal strip bordering Israel and Egypt. Since the militant group Hamas took control of the Strip in June 2007, it has been dangerous to adhere to anything but Hamas' brand of Islam and politics.

"When you say in Gaza, 'The Lord is my shelter, the Lord is my refuge,' you mean it literally," Massad says. "As a Christian you live between the fires: the fire of the militants and the fire of the Israelis and the siege [the closure of Gaza's borders], and also the fire of the nominal Christians who blame us."

Massad says that after Ayyad's murder, evangelical Christians

were under surveillance, and many stayed home for fear of being followed. The Israeli army secured exit visas for about a dozen families in Gaza, including the Massads and Ayyad's wife, children, mother and siblings. But it took two harrowing weeks to receive permission and get the families out of the simmering Strip.

In Bethlehem, a Palestinian city in the West Bank, this small band of Gazans joined another shrinking minority of Christians, both traditional-including Greek and Armenian Orthodox, Catholic and others-and evangelical. Christians made up more than 80 percent of the population in 1948, but have since fled the area en masse and immigrated to Western nations. Now less than 20 percent of the population of Bethlehem and its suburbs, Beit Jala and Beit Sahour, are Christian, according to most estimates. Only 2 percent of all Palestinian residents are Christian.

Though the media broadcast the Israeli-Palestinian conflict on a regular basis, they seldom report that Christian Palestinians are caught in the crossfire. Many are leaving the region due to a combination of economic and religious reasons.

"Currently the Christians are a shrinking and imperiled minority," says Justus Reid Weiner, a human rights attorney who has championed the Christian Palestinian cause. "Their percentage as well as their absolute numbers are falling year by year. Their neighborhoods, schools, universities are, by any measurement, no longer Christian.

"If there isn't some sort of dramatic change in the next 10 to 15 years, I would predict there would no longer be a functioning Christian community in the Palestinian territories," Weiner says.

No Law and Order

Interviews with several Palestinian Christians and statistics from the Israel-based Intelligence and Terrorism Information

Center show that the number of attacks on Christian and Western institutions by radical Muslims has escalated in the last decade. Hamas set a menacing tone when it took over the Gaza Strip in June 2007. Militants attacked and vandalized a monastery and church as one of their first acts. Since then, Christian and Western schools in Gaza have been broken into and vandalized, and both the Bible Society where Ayyad worked and the YMCA were firebombed.

"There is not really much law for believers-Christians-in Gaza," Massad says. "People say maybe there's more security, but for us as Christians we don't feel it is safe for us. Two years after the uprising, in September 2000, things became more difficult, more militant, more religious, more fanatic. Even at that time we didn't feel it was safe. But it became more dangerous after Hamas came to power."

An investigation into Ayyad's death has produced no arrests, and the killers remain at large.

After the Hamas takeover, many Christian men in Gaza began to grow beards, and many women donned head scarves so as not to draw unwanted attention. The Gaza Baptist Church was broken into and thousands of dollars' worth of equipment was stolen or destroyed. Warring factions also used the church as a hideout from which to shoot at their rivals.

Christians in the West Bank have more freedom but are still vastly outnumbered and face persecution. Isa Bajalia, an evangelical pastor in Ramallah, fled to Jerusalem this year after being threatened with the same fate as Ayyad if he did not give away his land. Palestinian authorities refused to help him.

Christians say that Muslim gunmen used their homes in the Bethlehem suburb of Beit Jala to shoot at an Israeli neighborhood across the border. Doing so caused the return fire from Israeli soldiers to batter Christian rather than

Muslim homes. In February 2002 a Muslim mob, including Palestinian Authority Special Forces, burned Christian businesses and attempted to destroy the Greek Orthodox and Roman Catholic churches in Ramallah.

Also in 2002, dozens of terrorists commandeered Bethlehem's Church of the Nativity-Jesus' historical birthplace-for 39 days during fighting with Israel. Israeli troops refused to storm the church, which was rigged with explosives, as more than 200 nuns and priests were trapped in the building. The Muslim gunmen desecrated the church and stole religious items on their way out.

Rapes and forced conversions of Christian women have been reported from all the territories. But because the Palestinian government usually favors Muslims, many victims don't bother filing complaints.

"Basically Christians are without recourse," Weiner says. "Nobody sticks up for them or protects their interests."

The story is worse for Muslims who convert to Christianity-an act punishable by death according to Islamic law. Few believers will speak of Muslim converts or publicly associate with them to avoid endangering their and the converts' lives.

But one convert in particular has no qualms about discussing his own past. Tass Abu Saada-once a Muslim who made *hajj*, or "pilgrimage," to Mecca many times; who supported the late Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat; and who shot at Israelis during one of the Palestinian uprisings-was discovered by Hamas to be a Christian. He was labeled a "Zionist traitor." On its Web site, Hamas threatened to "shred" his body.

Abu Saada says many Muslims have come to the Lord but that he currently has no contact with them. "They are in deep, deep hiding, but I know in the midst of that darkness in the Gaza Strip God was moving. Jesus was appearing in dreams.

“When I was there, there was a revival going on. People were having visions and dreams of Jesus, and they didn’t even know why or didn’t even know who Jesus was,” he says. “They came and asked questions. When we are asked, we respond.”

Despite the threats, Hamas did not realize that Abu Saada and his wife, Karen, were living in Gaza for more than a year, and had built a kindergarten and taught English. More than 3,200 youngsters graduated from their school of “democracy.”

Abu Saada, who describes his testimony in his autobiography, *Once an Arafat Man*, was born in Gaza but lived in Saudi Arabia and the United States, where he became a believer. After Ayyad’s murder in October 2007, Abu Saada was advised to leave the Strip along with other Gaza Christians.

However, according to one Palestinian Christian minister, there is no reason to leave. “Actually we have full freedom to minister in our churches; we have no persecution whatsoever from the Palestinian authorities,” claims the Rev. Munir Salim Kakish, president of the Council of Local Evangelical Churches in the Holy Land. “I put articles in *Al-Quds* newspaper advertising my church, and ... it is evangelistic. If anyone tries to attack us, the Palestinian Authority helps us.”

Kakish runs a home for needy children in Ramallah, West Bank. It is supported by the Palestinian Authority, which sends children to him, even Muslims. He also pastors a church there and in the Israeli town of Ramle. Kakish says that the problems the Palestinian Christians face are political, economic and cultural, not religious.

“There are ways some of them are [evangelizing] that I don’t agree with,” he says. “Sometimes they ask for it. They do things unwisely. The Bible says to be wise.

“Gaza is boiling-you don’t need to add to the fire more wood,” he continues. “When the government says, ‘Don’t spread the gospel openly,’ you must be wise.

“When you want to work with Muslims, you have to realize you might pay with your life. If someone gets saved, someone is going to come after you.”

Kakish also places more blame on Israeli persecution than Muslim persecution for the flight of Christians from the Holy Land. And he isn't alone.

Many traditional and some evangelical Christians consider being Palestinian a unifying force for Christians and Muslims in the territories, with their common enemy being the “occupier,” Israel.

Revival Despite Persecution

Politics and persecution aside, the power of the gospel is still evident. For example, the news of the salvation of a prominent Hamas leader's son, as reported in the Israeli newspaper *Haaretz*, has rocked the Palestinian territories. Ministers in the West Bank say that tensions have soared since it was reported last summer. The young man, Joseph, is in hiding in California.

Sheikh Hassan Yousef's son gave his life to Jesus after a yearlong spiritual search that began when he was invited to a meeting. He went out of curiosity but then started to read the Bible in secret to learn more.

“A verse like ‘love thine enemy’ had a great influence on me,” he says. “At this stage I was still a Muslim and I thought that I would remain one.”

Eventually Joseph gave his life to Jesus, though he didn't immediately tell his family. When this story was published in the local media it rocked the West Bank—a result he predicted.

“You'll see, this interview will open many people's eyes, it will shake Islam from the roots, and I'm not exaggerating,” he said at the time. “What other case do you know where a son of

a Hamas leader, who was raised on the tenets of extremist Islam, comes out against it?"

Indeed, Arab ministers who travel to the West Bank report that since the interview tensions have soared-but so have curiosity and hope.

"One of the biggest things is that Muslims used to say that Muslims will never become Christians, and now they realize they can," says one man who asked that his name not be used. "A barrier is broken-that is a very big breakthrough."

Though believers are guarded in nearly all Palestinian towns, the gospel has been openly shared in Jericho without much opposition. Isaac Nusseibeh, from a prominent Muslim family in Jerusalem, describes his salvation in the ancient biblical city. He met some American tourists who asked if they could pray for him.

"I started shaking. Someone came to me in a vision and said, 'Isaac, you must come to Jesus,'" he relates. "Jesus was dressed in white, and He shook me."

Unlike converts in other cities, Nusseibeh is openly Christian now and works with an organization in Jericho handing out Bibles and translating into Arabic. In the offbeat Jericho outpouring, women still wear their Muslim head scarves but worship Jesus in Christian gatherings, more openly than in many other places.

Another new development is Spirit-filled Arab believers. Most traditional Christian Arabs are not *Charismatic*, and even evangelicals tend to be more conservative than Western Christians. But in the last two years, a Spirit-filled Arab ministry named Upper Room was established. Andre Mubarak points out that this makes them a minority of a minority.

"Always, minorities make the most change in history," he smiles. "All Christians leave the country, but for me, as a

believer Spirit-filled, I want to be a light. Imagine Jerusalem with no Christians.”

Perhaps one of the greatest ironies, Massad says, is that Pauline Ayyad, wife of martyred Rami Ayyad, has returned to Gaza and is now leading Bible studies and women’s meetings in her home.

The Church’s Response

Christian Palestinians, almost without exception, say they are neglected by the church at large, especially by Christian Zionists who come to Israel to support the Jewish state. Weiner explains his shock at the lack of worldwide Christian interest in the Palestinian plight when he took up the cause more than a decade ago.

“With Christianity being the largest religion in the world, especially dominant in wealthy countries, what interest could the Palestinian Authority have in making the lives of these people difficult?” he asked himself at the time. “So often I felt like I was speaking to the deaf. So often I felt it was essentially hopeless, that these people would just suffer.”

The subject of Israel is a sore point for many Christian Palestinians who must endure checkpoints, border closures, stringent security checks and sometimes outright harassment. Many carry generational bitterness toward Israel for their loss of ancestral homes and land.

A few Palestinians have taken a stand on Israel’s right to exist and to own the land—a conviction that has drawn death threats and bullets in some cases. But all still empathize with the plight of the Palestinians in the current, desperate situation.

“Yes, we have to stand for the right of Israel to exist, but that is not on the expense of the Palestinian people,” Abu Saada says.

Abu Saada encourages Christians to “make sure that they bless the Palestinian Christians as well” when they visit Israel.

“Seek them out, bless them, pray with them, eat at their restaurants, stay at their hotels,” he says.

He explains the struggle he had, and that most Arab Christians have, to read the Old Testament. “They want to believe church replaced Israel,” he says. “‘Replacement theology’ is from the devil himself.”

Massad says it wasn’t easy for him to love the Jewish people after they caused his mother to suffer. A refugee from Jaffa, his mother moved to Gaza during Israel’s 1948 War of Independence and fully expected to return to her home someday.

“But because I experienced the love of God, we’re able to forgive and to live,” he says. “I once heard Messianic Jews praying, ‘God, give me enough love to be willing to die for my Palestinian brothers.’ We are honored to be part of this body and are honored to hear they stand by us.”

Nicole Schiavi is a journalist based in Jerusalem.

ONLINE EXCLUSIVE: Read more about Christians in Bethlehem [here](#).