

## Christians in Israel

- Christians constitute the 2% of Israel's population, numbering 161,000 individuals, 80% of whom identified with the Arab minority and 20% originating from ex-Soviet Union.
- The Christian community has a 1.7% growth rate as the Jewish population, with almost 30% under the age of 20.
- Christians live predominantly in the North and in Jerusalem. Large communities are in Haifa, Nazareth and many other villages.
- Christians report the highest rate of high school education among Israel's communities, a high rate of higher education, constituting almost the 2% of Israeli university students, which is conducive to rewarding jobs.
- Christians are divided in several denominations recognised as autonomous communities for the self-government of communal issues. The majority of the Christians are Maronite, Assyrian, Greek-Orthodox and Roman Catholic.

## Integration and hostilities

- Part of the Christian population has integrated into Israeli society, with a strikingly growing number of youth serving in the army and choosing the civil service, considered the ultimate sign of loyalty toward the state.



- Another part of the Christian population has adopted the Palestinian identity and narrative, with a growing hostility toward Israel and governmental institutions.
- Major social problems are caused by Muslim hostilities toward Christians. In Jerusalem, the Christian population tipped down to the 2% while being the 20% in the late 1940s.



Nazareth. A sign quotes from the Quran about the superiority of Islam over other religions.

- Muslim-Christian relations are tensed in mixed villages and Nazareth, where Christians are increasing leaving for settling in more comfortable environments including Christian-only villages or Jewish towns.



Nazareth. A sign inviting non-Muslims to modestly show their religious affiliation.

- One such case is the Muslim project to build a mosque in Nazareth right near to the Church of the Annunciation. Unreported cases of anti-Christian harassment and violence by Muslim neighbours are frequent in Jerusalem and other predominantly Muslim villages.

## The Israel-Christian link



Father Gabriel Nadaf with PM Benjamin Netanyahu

- In 2012, a group of Christians under the spiritual leadership of Greek-Orthodox Father Gabriel Nadaf and the social leadership of First Lieutenant Shadi Khalloul founded the Israel Christian Forum for IDF Enlistment and the Israel Christian Lobby.
- The Forum supports Christian youth enlistment in the IDF as part of a general advocacy to strengthen Christian attachment to the State of Israel.

- Members of this movement do not look upon themselves as Arabs, but as Christian Arameans or Christian Greeks, representing the original Christian population prior to Islamic conquest.
- A growing number of Christians serve in the Israeli Defence Forces. 300 Christian soldiers are believed to serve in the IDF, with 80 new conscripts in 2013 (no official record).



First Lieutenant Shadi Khalloul

teaching Aramaic in a Christian school.

- This movement advocates for the recognition of Christians as a separate community in Israeli institutions, otherwise being trapped as a minority within the overly Muslim Arab community. In March 2014, the Knesset recognised Christians as a separate minority group for the purposes of the Equal Opportunities Commission.
- The political and social views of this movement are rejected by the Muslim Arab, accusing them of dividing the Arab public, and often turn into physical and verbal hostilities.

### Christians in the Middle East

- Christians in Israel represent a unique case of growth and prosperity of the generally decreasing Christian population in the region, which once constituted 20% of the population and now decreased to 5%.



Demonstration organised by Israeli

Christians against Christian persecution in the Middle East 23 March 2014.

- Consistent Middle-East Christian depopulation due to institutional discrimination, social violence and direct oppression is evident in Iraq, Egypt, the West Bank and Syria.
- Christians in the Middle East used to bear independent national and cultural identity until the 19th century. Many Christian communities still speak Aramaic, which is being revived in Northern Israel. During the development of Arab nationalism and

pan-Arabism in the late Ottoman Empire, Christians have progressively assimilated into the Arab nation, substantially contributing to the development of modern Arabic culture and national identity.

- Lebanon was designed to be the national Christian enclave in the Middle East, but the project has long failed due to the decreasing number of Christians and the growing inter-Islamic fights, which jeopardise Christian security.
- The current return to Islamic identity puts Christian communities in severe danger, being increasingly perceived as enemies to be fought.



23 march 2014 demonstration of Israeli Christians in front of EU Delegation in Tel Aviv.

- Despite alarming reports of anti-Christian persecution, there is no clear policy in the Churches and in the Western states regarding the protection of Christian communities.
- Many authors believe that the current status of Christians is comparable to the status of Jews in Arab and Muslim countries in the late 19th and 20th century, whereby the growing anti-Jewish hostility brought to the expulsion of Jews from Arab countries.
- According to some interpretations, anti-Christian violence is part of a general instability of the region, aggravated by the perception of Christians as disloyal for their religious affinities with the Western world. According to other interpretations, current anti-Christian persecution is the return to a traditional Islamic hostility against non-Muslim communities under Islamic rule.

## **Interview with Shadi Khalloul**

*Spokesman Israel Christian Recruitment Forum*

### **Who are the Christians favouring integration into Israeli society?**

We are several groups of Christians resident in different villages, primarily from North Israel. Numerous associations represent us, including the "Christian Lobby", for advancing Christians' interests in Israel, the "Aramean-Christian Association", for preserving our Aramean identity and the Aramaic language, and the Christian Forum for supporting Christians' enrolment in the Israeli Army. There are also the "Association Georgios" and the "Association Bnei Moshia" (Sons of the Saviour), dealing with educational and social activities. We all have in common the will to integrate into Israeli society.

### **Many of you serve in the Israeli Army, why?**

We are Christians and citizens of Israel and we believe that we have to contribute to the State of Israel and its defence. We believe in equality of rights and duties. That is why we are active in different villages in order to favour the enrolment of young Christians in the Army. We organise meetings, give information and support youth willing to serve in the army. It is our duty as citizens of Israel.

### **You do not look upon yourselves as Arabs but as Arameans, why?**

We are Israeli by citizenship, Aramean by nationality and Christian by religion. This is our identity. We are not Arabs. Christians have abandoned their identity when Arab nationalism and pan-Arabism have developed, but if you consider Christians in the Middle East today, that choice was not rewarding. Many people think we do not have a real point, even among Christians. They may think what most pleases them, but they have to accept that we are not Arabs, but Aramean and Christian and that our roots are here, in the Middle East.

### **How is your life in Israel?**

Israel is a paradise for us. Israel is the paradise for Christians from the Middle East. Look what happens in the region! In Israel we enjoy freedom and have rights, we can say what we want, organise activities, found associations, and that is why we can be so active in society.

### **But Israel is a Jewish state, and you are a minority.**

We haven't got any problems with the Jewish and democratic state. The state's flag has got the Star of David, and so what? The majority of the population is Jewish, and so what? We live in peace with Jews and with other minorities. We consider Israel our home; we are loyal to the state and willing to integrate.

### **How do you consider the attitude of the West toward Christians in the Middle East?**

How should we consider the absolute silence of Europe and other Western states? We ask them to open up their eyes; we urge them to do something against the ethnic cleansing of Christians in the Middle East, which has been going on for 400 years! Today everything is so evident: newspapers and TVs report what is happening, and yet the West keeps silent.

Christians have been expelled, massacred, their properties have been destroyed and those who remain are discriminated and subject to continuous violence. And the world keeps quiet. The West and Europe need to step up and do something for the Christians in Iraq, Syria, as they did in Lebanon in 1960s. They must stop Islamic and Arab terrorism, be it Sunni or Shi'i. They must take action to protect Christians, through sanctions and guaranteeing security.

### **How to protect Christians in the Middle East? It is not a simple task.**

Lebanon was born as the national home for Christians. It is not by chance that North of Lebanon there is a place called Wadi al-Nassra, the Valley of the Christians. That was a solution: the national homeland of Christians in the Middle East, where Christians could live in peace.

There is also the question of weapons. There is a war going on here and all factions, Alawite, Sunni and Shii are armed and covered in money by the Islamic world. Nobody arms Christians, and that is why they keep being killed.

### **But Europe mediates conflicts and it is not prone to support weapons.**

The problem here is that even though Christians do not take part in the conflict, they are victims. Who defends Christians? Nobody. And so they are being slaughtered like goats. Europe needs to act now because soon what is going on here will arrive there as well.

### **You mean a wave of violence in Europe?**

Europe has already got many problems with Islamic communities. When they will be done with Christians here, they will get to Europe. They will kill Christians in Italy, France and in the UK, as already happened to the British soldier beheaded in London by an Islamist fanatic in May 2013.

We organised last month a demonstration in front of the Delegation of the European Union in Tel Aviv to protest against the silence of European states. It was a successful event, organised in cooperation with "Im Tirzu", an Israeli association aiming at strengthening Zionist values and helping loyal minorities to integrate.

### **The Knesset recognised Christians as a separate minority in the Equal Opportunities Commission. Arab Members of Knesset were very hostile, why?**

Because they are racist. This is racism against those who do not look upon themselves as Arabs. Arab identity encompasses everybody, also Jews and Christians, but those who have a different national identity are not accepted. Isn't this racism? That is why I repeatedly state that racism originates from the Arab community and not from the Jewish.

### **In Israel there are many communities, why such a deep hostility against you?**

Their goal is to use Christians against Israel, but once we are considered a separate group and we will finally integrate, they won't use Christians to tell the West how racist Israel is.



Arabs do not accept the existence of Israel and accuse it of being racist. Our stance is very simple: we are not Arab; we are happy to live in Israel and to contribute to our state, and they need to come to terms with this.

### **How are relations with other Arab communities?**

As Christian Arameans we've got peaceful relations with everybody, as long as they recognise our right to live as we want and according to our identity. In Israel we live considerably well, although in villages where Christians are a minority, people live in fear. And that is why many Christians are against us, because they are too afraid of the Arab nation.

### **You mean those who look upon themselves as "Christian Arabs"?**

They are assimilationist Christians, who believe that giving up their Aramean and Christian identity, they may live in peace with the Arabs. But this is absurd. Look what is going on in Syria: in the 18<sup>th</sup> century Christians adopted Arabic giving up Aramaic, they contributed to Arab nationalism and pan-Arabism, they contributed to literature, music and theatre. And look at Christians today: they are considered infidels to be killed and thrown out of their country.

Hence, we believe that we need to go back to our national identity, teaching Aramaic in schools, preserving our culture and our place in the Middle East.

### **Someone could tell you that Christianity is a religion of peace.**

In the Middle East the logic of violence prevails. For surviving, you need to be strong. Christianity is a religion of peace, but not of submission. The "turn the other cheek" principle is used as an excuse! Jesus teaches tolerance, but this does not mean that we turn to self-destruction!

## **Interview with Johnny Curi**

*Israeli Christian (the editorial staff chose a fancy name).*

### **How do Christians live in Israel?**

We live in peace and security in Israel; we are not discriminated against and we enjoy our freedom; we can practice our religion and live according to our traditions.

### **It seems quite a different life to that of many Christians in the Middle East.**

Our life is dramatically different from that of Christians in other Middle-East countries, including the Palestinian Territories, where Christians are subject to discrimination, racism and oppression.

### **Christian sufferance is usually related to the Israeli occupation.**

If occupation were the real problem, then why didn't Christians flee when Israelis were in control of the Territories? The Christian exodus began in 2000, with the Second Intifada. A few people remember what used to happen in Bet Jalla, a Christian village between Jerusalem and Bethlehem: Muslims used to break into Christian homes for shooting at Israelis, making their living impossible. The truth is that under Israeli occupation there was more freedom.

### **But the allegation is that Israeli policies are directed against Christians as well.**

Do you remember the incident of the Church of the Nativity in 2000? Muslim Palestinian terrorists broke into the Church and behaved disrespectfully in the place of cult. Israeli tanks were outside; if they really wanted they could organise an assault operation and enter into the Church. They didn't because they were respectful of the Church. But the world talked about the siege on the Church of the Nativity, and so it is today, always against Israel.

### **The number of Christians serving in the army is growing, why do you want to enrol?**

We live here; we are citizens of Israel and the military service is part of our duty as citizens. If we want to be equal citizens and pretend equality, so why shouldn't you serve in the IDF? "Ask from the state if you've got to give to the state": we want to integrate and we want institutions to listen to us, and as all other citizens we go to the army. You cannot always look at the past and recriminate for what happened or did not happen. Our life is here and we want a future for our children.

### **How do you spread your message in the Christian community?**

We have organisations meeting the youth for favouring enlistment and they take care of those who enrol even after the service, helping them to integrate in the job market or to start their studies in university. The Ministry of Security also appointed someone responsible for Christian soldiers.



## **Several people, even within the Christian community, oppose you, why?**

There are several Arab Members of Knesset, even Christian. What do they do for us Christians? Nothing. What do they do for the Christians in the Middle East? Nothing. They deal with the properties of the wakf in Acco, the Islamic communal organisation. They give public speeches and interviews, but nothing practical. Others, like us, are convinced that the integration of Christians into the Israeli society is the only way to have a life and a future in our Country.

## **Christians are deemed to belong to the Arab minority, which is predominantly Muslim: what are the implications on Christians?**

Arab representatives do not care about Christians. There is a commission at the Ministry of Education that deals with Arab schools curricula: everything is about Islamic history and culture and nothing about Christian history and culture, so those who can afford it give children an education in private Christian schools. If we had our own representatives, as a community, we could advance our interests, while now nobody cares about us, because Muslims are always the majority. We want to study and be educated in our culture, which is the Aramean.

## **You speak about your Christian identity, not about Christian-Arab identity, and now you talk about “Aramean culture”, why?**

We are not Arabs. Christians here are predominantly Maronites and Greek-Orthodox. Our prayers are in Aramaic and Greek, how can we be Arab? There are Christian Arabs, praying in Arabic, because when Arabs invaded the Near East and after under Ottoman rule, Christians were obliged to abandon their creed, their identity, to convert or to accept submission and the infidel tax for conducting a normal life. It is the logic of the dhimma. The strongest have kept their identity alive. How do you explain that our sacred texts are in Aramaic and Greek? It is because we are not Arabs.

## **So you look upon yourselves as Christian-Arameans?**

Precisely. In Syria and Iraq, Christians have spoken Aramaic until a few decades ago and there are still villages in which people speak Aramaic. There were schools in Israel in which Aramaic used to be taught until the 1950s. And now we are reviving Aramaic, teaching our children and reintroducing the language in daily life. This is the land where Jesus was born, raised and lived speaking Aramaic. Jesus was not Arab, as many priests and politicians say today.

## **Then why do many Christians define themselves Arab Palestinians?**

They do it for fear. I believe they keep silent and do not rise up against Arab oppression for fear that things may worsen. Look what happens in Syria, but they prefer speaking up against Israel. If Israel is such a racist country, why are Christians finding jobs? How do you explain that there are Christian judges? Is that racism? Obviously there is racism, you can find it everywhere, but the state is not, racist.

## **And yet, it is the primary allegation against Israel, in Arab-Israeli and Palestinian milieus.**

The problem lies in education. We were educated to respect diversity, to respect the state and the institutions, and we educate our children accordingly. In other cultures it is not like that. In the Palestinian Authority, children are indoctrinated to fight against the Israeli enemy, to conquer back "Al-Aqsa": if these are the values they are imbued with, how do you think they will grow up?

My neighbours are Jewish and we have excellent relations. My children go to a private Christian school and at home we have the Israeli flag. They grow on values of freedom, solidarity and respect toward all, and with the Israeli flag in our living room.

## **How are Muslim-Christian relations in Israel?**

In the cities there are no problems. In the villages, the situation is different. We Christians willing to integrate have difficult relations with those who do not share our views, but the relations with Muslims are more critical and tensed. For instance, during our festivities they interfere with rituals and marches, insulting, throwing stones.

They now want to build a mosque in front of the Church of the Annunciation in Nazareth, where they say there is the grave of the Islamic wise Shahab ad-Din. Nazareth is being depopulated of Christians, who prefer to live in Nazareth Illit, the Jewish town. There is little to do about it, it is a question of mentality.

## **You have different associations representing Israeli Christians, how has your movement begun?**

Everything started two years ago, during a conference on the situation of Christians in Israel and in the Middle East. Many leaders, religious leaders and members of many communities gathered to talk about how to integrate in Israel. Right after, threats and violence has begun against organisers and priests. Many have since abandoned the project, but Father Gabriel Nadaf and Shadi Khalloul have continued the activities.

## **Are there still episodes of violence?**

Sure there are. One son of Gabriel Nadaf's has been beaten in December last year. Shadi Khalloul was threatened when on February he gave a speech at the Knesset meeting on recognising Christians as a separate minority group, and one MK shouted him "go to Nazareth and say the same things, let's see what will happen to you".

## **They claim that the Israeli government exploits you for dividing the Arab community.**

What exploitation are they talking about? When Netanyahu meets our leaders he does not do it for interests: have you ever heard of it? He doesn't use the meetings for media campaigns. We've got good relations with the institutions because we are loyal to the state, but we have our own interests and requests. But above-all we have a common goal, which is to live in peace.

### **So what is the Arabs' interest in opposing Christian integration?**

The Western world is Christian, and Palestinians and Arabs have all interest to keep Christians with them, in order to convince the world that Israel harms Arabs and Christians. But it is not true. They don't say anything about Christians being massacred today and not about massacres that happened in history. They do not even talk about Jews massacred, like the 1929 Hebron slaughter. My neighbour is Jewish, originally Iraqi and he tells about how they were well off and how suddenly, one day, they were expelled after a series of violence. In Lebanon, the first big massacre of Christians perpetrated by Muslims occurred in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Of this Arab Israeli parliamentarians don't talk, as they keep silent about the mass depopulation of Christians in the Middle East.

### **Aren't they open to internal criticism?**

What do Arab members of Knesset do? They denounce poverty in Arab villages, but do not say that the residents don't pay taxes in general, and they don't even say anything about public money being squandered by families with status instead of being invested in services and infrastructures.

In Turan, a mixed Christian-Muslim villages, the government appointed a Jewish mayor: now there are schools, infrastructures, roads and public services. And at the beginning of his mandate he was even shot! But what you would hear is that the government is racist and appoint Jewish mayors in Arab towns, without portraying the whole reality.

### **What is your message to the Western world and to the Churches?**

Christians have lived here for 2000 years; Jesus was born, raised and lived here. We live in Israel in peace and prosperity; Christians do not flee from Israel. All around Israel Christians are escaping and suffering from violence and discrimination. In France, there are 90.000 Maronites who fled from Lebanon, and it is not an isolated case. Muslims want Christians to get out of the Middle East and I would like Europe and the world to understand that what is going on here will soon happen in Europe as well.

Europeans in particular should start thinking closely about why Christians are running away from the Middle East. Churches are being destroyed here, while mosques are being built in Europe. This is what is going on, and they have to reflect on this.

Regarding Churches, I would say something very easy. Churches have got many properties here, and instead of investing in supporting Arabs they should invest for Christians to stay. There are almost no more Christians in Bethlehem, a few remain in Jerusalem and in Nazareth they are decreasing. They could invest in schools, help Christians maintain their culture, supporting young Christian couples with homes, school taxes for children and so on.

And I would add that Europeans are hypocrites. They accuse Israel of everything, and mainly of being racist. But this is not true. When missiles were plunging on Northern Israel during the Second Lebanon War, my son was so afraid that his hair became white and developed many psychosomatic diseases. But maybe this is not of their interest?

We all live well here, Jews, Christians, Muslims and Druse. You want to help here? Make Christians stay, because it could be that soon there won't be Christians in the Middle East, apart from Israel.