

My name is Omar Haramy and I am a Palestinian Christian from Jerusalem. I currently hold the position of Director at [Sabeel](#), the home of Palestinian Liberation Theology.

Sabeel is a Palestinian Christian grass root organization that aims to liberate Christian theology from people who manipulate scripture to justify the oppression of the Palestinian people. Sabeel also actively develops a theology of liberation to help our Christian community to become active in the work for justice and peace in the holy Land.

In this article, I hope to introduce the 10 most common questions on the topic of Palestinians Christians. Definitely each point can be expanded into an entire article or even a book, but I do believe shorter articles have a better chance to be read.

1. **Who are the Palestinian Christians?**

The term Palestinian Christians is used to describe the indigenous Christians of the holy Land. The book of Acts 2: 9-11 tell us that at the time of Pentecost, marking the beginning of the Church, Jerusalem was filled with all nations. Although most Palestinian Christians identify themselves as Arabs, Palestinian Christians reflect the mosaic of all nations and people who have lived in the Holy Land for many centuries. Although Palestinian Christians are estimated to constitute 10 % of all Palestinians worldwide, Palestinian Christians who live in the holy land are less than 200,000, constituting less than 1% of the entire population.

2. **What denominations do Palestinian Christians belong too?**

Palestinian Christians belong to the main four Christian Families (Greek Orthodox, the Catholic Church, Oriental Orthodox Churches, Protestant Churches). The majority of Palestinian Christians are both Greek Orthodox or belong to the different parts of the Catholic church with important percentages who are members of the Oriental Orthodox (Mainly Armenian, Syrian Orthodox and Coptic) and a rising number of the different Protestant Churches (Anglican, Lutheran, and Evangelical Churches). There is a total of 13 churches that's are state recognized churches in Jerusalem and a group of evangelical churches.

3. **Who are the Church leadership in the Holy Land?**

There are thirteen different official churches in the Holy Land. Apart of the Anglican and Lutheran Churches the leadership of the remaining 11 Churches is comprised of internationals. The international church leadership in the Holy Land is different from the norm of having Church leaderships that are from the local community, creating a gap between the aspirations of the local Christian community and their

representatives. During the past decades some Christian Church leadership have been engaged with scandals of land sales, or seen as silent towards the human rights violations against Palestinians by the state of Israel.

4. Where do the Palestinian Christians live in the Holy Land?

- I. Palestine: close to 50,000 Christians live in two different parts of Palestine:
 - i. West Bank
 - a) Bethlehem area: 27,000 Palestinian Christians live in the area of Bethlehem and its surrounding towns (beit Sahhour and Beit Jalla)
 - b) East Jerusalem: close to 9000 Christians live in East Jerusalem
 - c) Ramallah and surrounding villages: 12,000 Palestinian Christians
 - d) Nablus and surrounding villages: 1,000 Palestinian Christians
 - e) Jenin and surrounding villages: 3,000 Palestinian Christians
 - f) Jericho: 800 Palestinian Christians
 - ii. Gaza

In Gaza close to 1000 Palestinian Christians live today in the Gaza Strip.

- II. Israel: close to 140,00 Palestinian Christians live inside the state of Israel and hold the Israeli citizenship. the majority of Palestinian Christians today live inside Israel in the following cities and their surroundings:
 - i. Nazareth
 - ii. Shafa Amr
 - iii. Haifa
 - iv. Jaffa
 - v. Akka
 - vi. In 25 different Palestinians villages inside Israel.

5) Historically what are the major Challenges that have faced Palestinian Christians:

a) early church persecution: the early church suffered lots of persecution from both the Jewish leadership and later from the Roman Empire. The early church was seen as a heretic group of Jews who was introducing new teachings of not obeying the law and no longer adhering to monotheism.

b) the coming of Islam: in Arabic we have a saying that the people follow the religion of their kings. With the coming of Islam in the 7th century to Palestine, Islam became the

state religion. The people of the land have experienced both types of leaders. A group of leaders that are very tolerant to other faith communities, while other periods of time many rulers that were extremely violent and imposed persecution on the different faith communities of the land.

c) The crusades: the different crusades have contributed to widening the division between the Christian world and the Muslim world. The Muslim world saw the local Christian community as a threat as some Christian communities revolted against their Muslim rulers during the crusades. The relationship of the Christian Local community and Islam changed to the worse after the crusades.

d) Missionary work of protestant churches: when the Muslim world and the western christian world reestablished relationships in the past two centuries, new western Churches were allowed to visit and establish churches in the holy Land. Many of these Churches had the aspirations to establish a following among the local community and began actively promoting their version of Christianity to the local Christian community. The coming of competing Churches contributed to divisions among the local Churches and hence weakened our local community further.

e) The creation of the state of Israel in 1948- the Palestinian Nakba: in 1948 two thirds of the Palestinian community became refugees. It is estimated that 20 percent of the Palestinian refugees were Christians. Palestinian refugees were either forced to flee their land or had fled out of fear from the organized violence from the Zionist militias, the emptying of the land was a necessity for the Zionist movement to establish a country with a majority Jewish population

6) What is the contribution of Palestinian Christians to the Palestinians society?

Although Palestinian Christians constitute less than 1% of the entire population, Palestinian Christians are extremely active within the Palestinians society. there are over 120 Christian schools and universities in both Palestine and Israel and over 600 active organizations that offer essential services to all the inhabitants of the holy land.

7) What is the relationship between Palestinian Christians and Palestinian Muslims?

In general, both Palestinian Christians and Palestinian Muslims enjoy a healthy relationship. In the past few years there has been an increase in religious extremism that has raised the concerns of both communities.

8) What is the relationship of Palestinian Christians with the Palestinian Authority?

Palestinian Christians are well represented in all the governmental bodies. The Palestinian legislative council has a quota for Palestinian Christians. The mayors of multiple Palestinian cities and towns must be Christian and a specific percentage of the municipality council should be held by Palestinian Christians. In the past Palestinian governments an average of 15-25% of ministers have been Palestinian Christians, a much higher percentage of the Palestinian Christian percentage of the population.

Despite the Palestinian Christian community representation in the different governmental bodies in Palestine, many Palestinian Christians feel that the Palestinian education system is a major challenge to promote tolerance and coexistence.

Many Palestinian Christians actively advocate for having a constitution that is based more on secular principles while many of the Palestinian community endorse a constitution based on Islamic law.

9) What is the relationship of Palestinians Christians and the Christian world?

The relationship with the Christian world, specifically the Christian world in the west is affected by the following factors:

- a) Most of the Christian world is unaware that Palestinian Christians exist. Many Christians presume that Palestinian Christians are new converts from Islam, rather an indigenous community with roots to the early church. Even when millions of Christians come for pilgrimage to the Holy Land, their interest is in historical places and religious sites rather than the living Christian Community?
- b) The Christian world is governed with the following issues when approaching the topic of Palestine:
 - i. Anti-Semitism: after the end of World War II, and rightfully, the Christian world in the west has started to review the relationship of Christianity and Judaism. In the light of this review, Christians and churches have tried to distance themselves from any critique of the State of Israel in fear that the criticism of Israel could be perceived as a form of anti-Semitism.
 - ii. The development of end time theology: in the 19th century a number of Christian theologians began to develop an end time theology that stated that the gathering of the Jews in the Holy Land is essential for the second coming of Christ. Due to the establishment of the state of Israel in 1948, despite all the odds, and the popularity of a number of movies, TV series

and novels, this theology gained popularity in the North America and the many parts of Europe. This theology is referred as Christian Zionism.

- iii. Islamophobia: in the 20th century the notion that the clash of civilizations is eminent, and the world was divided between a world of Judeo Christian values and a world with Muslim values. Islam became the enemy of the western world. The newly developed state of Israel was seen as the important ally who was standing to confront the Muslim world and keep it under control. Many Christians in the world who buy into this theory stand with Israel because of the fear and hatred of Muslims.

10) Do Palestinian Christians get treated in a special way from the Israeli Government?

Regardless of the faith of Palestinians, we are all seen by the state of Israel as the other group of people who inhabit the Holy Land. All Palestinians are treated in the discriminating way depending to what geographical area they come from in the holy land rather their faith tradition:

- A) Palestinian Citizens of Israel: Palestinian Citizens of the state of Israel are treated as second class citizens. Israel defines itself as a Jewish state, therefore places legislation that discriminates against the non-Jewish citizens of Israel.
- B) Palestinians of East Jerusalem: Palestinians who live inside Jerusalem are seen as permanent residents of the state of Israel. Palestinians inside East Jerusalem hold a unique identity card that enables them to travel freely inside Israel but limits their access to all services.
- C) Palestinians who live in the West bank and Gaza live under Israeli military occupation. although the Palestinian Authority in some areas of the West Bank has a limited control over administrative and security services, the Israeli military has full control over Palestinians.

In the above sections I tried my best to address the most common questions on Palestinian Christians. through these questions I have hope to introduce Palestinian Christianity community to the readers of this article. I understand every answer to the question could be elaborated on, however I hope the reader would be able to learn about our small community that has been living and faithfully worship the good lord for centuries in the Holy Land.