

Does Israel Permit Freedom of Worship?

Palestinian Christians will soon be extinct

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A week ago I wrote [a piece](#) describing how Israel’s power over the US government is such that no American official will confirm that the Israelis have, and have had for years, a secret nuclear arsenal consisting of as many as 200 nukes. The situation is particularly odd in that the United States is on record as being strongly opposed to nuclear proliferation, except for Israel, and the enriched uranium that was used to create Israel’s bombs as well as the nuclear triggers were stolen and exported illegally from the US. Former Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu himself was reportedly involved in the thefts. One lawyer friend has suggested that the reason for the reticence is that under US law by way of the Symington Amendment, no assistance or aid can be given to any country that has not signed the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT). Israel has not signed and also has a widely acknowledged nuclear arsenal. To preserve Israel’s billions of dollars in annual largesse from the US taxpayer, silence over what goes on when the government breaks its own laws must be maintained. Some might consider that a case of pandering to Israel rather than taking steps to enhance United States security, but when it comes to the Jewish state that argument is a non-starter in Washington as Israel always comes first.

This week I am going to describe another aspect of the Zionist state’s policy that has been invisible if one relies on the mainstream media or the chattering magpies that occupy Capitol Hill and the White House. That is the ongoing elimination of Christianity in the region where it was born being carried out by Israel and its friends. The United States has been the enabler of much of the change in spite of the prevalence of self-described devout Christians in Congress, many of whom ironically are vocal and even enthusiastic supporters of Israeli “security” policies. Killing Palestinians is all too often justified in Congress and the White House with the meaningless expression “Israel has a right to defend itself.”

American power wielded on behalf of Israel has already destroyed a thriving Christian community in Iraq while still laboring to do the same in Syria and possibly even Lebanon. At Christianity’s very birthplace, in what was once Palestine, Israel has been engaged in making the lives of Palestinian so miserable that they frequently choose to emigrate. Israel’s

first Prime Minister David Ben-Gurion [famously declared](#) in a letter to his son that “We must expel the Arabs and take their places...” and he exploited massacres of unarmed civilians carried out by the Haganah to create terror to accomplish that end. Since that time, Israel has refused to allow Palestinians driven from their homes by the 1948 fighting to return, [has destroyed](#) more than 400 Arab villages and confiscated other Palestinian properties, has appropriated additional land and water resources for its illegal settlements, has allowed armed settlers to destroy Palestinian crops and other forms of livelihood, and controlled Palestinian movements through a network of Jews only roads and numerous checkpoints. Even Palestinians who happen to be Israeli citizens are legally and in practice treated like second-class citizens with limited rights. There are more than [60 laws](#) in Israel that discriminate against non-Jews while Israel now legally defines itself as a Jewish state. Israel has also imprisoned without any trial thousands of West Bank and Jerusalem Palestinians, including children, and shot dead hundreds more.

I could go on, but the point is that Israel wants Palestinians gone, a process that has particularly impacted on the Christian community. It has not been done by ethnic cleansing in the classic sense after the initial Nakba massacres and appropriations in 1948, but rather accomplished by creating incentives to leave. And it has been successful. At the end of the Second World War, an estimated one third of the Palestinian population identified as Christian, but the percentage is [currently closer to 9%](#) and continuing to decline. The numbers suggest that Christians in the former Palestine are verging on extinction. In fact, Christians have been able to become disproportionately emigrants from their homeland because they more frequently than Muslims have family already established in Europe and the US and have also been able to rely on networking through their churches for resettlement assistance in a new country.

Even by the wretched standards of the past 70 years, Israel’s seeking a “final solution” with the Palestinians recently has become particularly outrageous, focusing as it does on loosening their ties to their religious and cultural institutions while also destroying their livelihoods and appropriating their properties.

Hardly reported in the US media was the use of new Israeli imposed security restrictions to disrupt this year’s Palestinian Christian Orthodox Easter celebrations of Christ’s Resurrection at the Church of the Holy Sepulcher in Jerusalem. This comes on top of similar police action to support the usual crowd of rampaging settlers and other Jewish extremists at the most recent Ramadan services held by Palestinian Muslims at the al-Aqsa Mosque, which included [using a drone](#) to fire tear gas at worshippers.

What took place during Holy Week and more particularly on Easter Sunday [has been described](#) by Rod Dreher, who writes for *The American Conservative*. I will confess that I do not much like Dreher as he is fond of celebrating himself in everything he writes, full of navel gazing and smug sanctimonious twaddle, but as he was a participant and eye witness to what occurred his account is of necessity extremely valuable. To be sure, he makes it clear that readers understand that he is not criticizing Israelis in general, nor is he engaging in anything objectionable to Jewish sensitivities when he includes himself in how “we American Christians, especially those who support Israel,” also as “an American who cares about Israel,” and who refers to “my Israeli Jewish friends” and then goes on to assert “I condemn anti-Semitism unreservedly. Criticizing the Jewish settlers and official Israeli policy does not constitute anti-Semitism” before concluding that “most Israeli Jews wouldn’t

support these hate-filled radical settlers.”

Actually, the US and other governments as well as many states do believe that criticism of Israel is anti-Semitism [as defined by](#) the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance. And, depending on how the question is phrased many, possibly most Jews worldwide, support firm action against Muslims in particular, who are routinely described in the media and by the Israeli government as “terrorists.” Rod clearly understands that it is a bad idea to veer into areas that Jews are uncomfortable with as they can be surprisingly sensitive and unreasonably reactive to perceived slights. No need to bite the hand that feeds you, as one might put it, particularly if one wants to stay employed.

Dreher reports how he was “staying at a hotel inside the Old City, where I was advised to book a room out of fear that the Jerusalem police would not let Christians into the Old City on Holy Saturday. This turns out to have been very good advice.” Holy Saturday for Orthodox Christians features a “miracle” of the Holy Fire, which is believed to be the first sign of the Resurrection of Jesus. Normally, at 11 am, the Church of the Holy Sepulcher opens and is quickly packed with believers. After noon, the Greek Patriarch the “little house” built directly over the tomb of Christ, prays, and what is referred to as “divine energy” descends from heaven to light the Patriarch’s candles, the flames from which are shared with everyone present. He then emerges and passes the flame to everyone there.

Dreher and a friend reportedly left their hotel early to pray but when they arrived at the end of the street at the Jaffa Gate, two Jewish police officers refused to allow them to pass out of the Old City, warning that if they left they might not be able to come back in. They then walked over to an access point to the Jaffa Gate, and witnessed a large group of Christians behind a barrier on the other side, blocked from entering into the Old City where the Church of the Holy Sepulcher is situated. Dreher observed that at the same time Orthodox Jews wearing white prayer shawls, entered freely into the Old City on their way to the Western Wall to pray on the Jewish Sabbath. Later that morning, Dreher was only allowed to pass into the Church of the Holy Sepulcher because he had obtained a ticket to the “fire” service. The tickets, to control and limit attendance at the church was an innovation by the Israeli police. [The Patriarch objected, observing that tickets had never before been required.](#) The tickets allowed entry of only 1,800 worshipers in the church, which normally accommodates 10,000, a reduction of 82% of the faithful permitted to be in attendance on the highest of all holy days.

An Anglican priest from Virginia who spoke to Dreher at the service described that morning’s experience this way: “Police checkpoints were at every corner. Even when we reached the private property of the Greek Patriarchate, police had taken over there as well. They actually turned back nearly a dozen Consuls General and other diplomatic representatives, including ones from the United States. We had to take an alternative route to get inside. If that was the way it worked for VIPs, imagine you’re a local Palestinian Christian simply trying to worship on the holiest of Christian holidays inside the church built over the very Tomb of Christ.”

At issue are demands by radical Jewish groups, most notably the extremist Jewish settlers’ organization Ateret Cohanim, a type of Jewish Taliban, to “cleanse” Jerusalem of all non-Jews. They have been aggressively buying or otherwise [occupying properties](#) in and around the traditional Christian and Muslim quarters of the city and often use violence when they are resisted by local residents. Christians, unlike the Muslim community, notably do not tend to resort to violence in support of their property or civic rights even though recourse to the

Israeli courts is useless as the judges have consistently sided with the settlers and police.

In Jerusalem there have been regular instances of verbal abuse, vandalism and spitting on Christian clergy, as well as sporadic violent assaults. In the Armenian Christian quarter [a monk reports](#) how “[The settlers] destroy the tires of our cars, graffiti ‘death to Christians’, break windows, they desecrate our cemetery, you know... ugly things, and it’s really invasive.” Some Christians have pointed to what happened to the former St John’s Hospice near the Jaffa Gate as a prime example of what the Christian churches fear could happen across the quarter. The building’s lintel still shows the tau-phi monogram of the Greek Patriarchate but in 1990, this pilgrims’ hostel was illegally occupied by Ateret Cohanim, and now the vast building is covered with multiple Israeli flags and houses violent armed Israeli settlers. The local Christians Dreher talked to “believe that this is part of a settler plot to choke off access to Christian holy sites within the city, and force Christians out.”

The Israeli authorities tend to ignore the settler activity as they have powerful supporters, including from the diaspora community in the US and some Evangelicals who help to fund them. Ateret Cohanim’s 2010 annual gathering featured as guest speaker no less than John Bolton and the Kushner Family Foundation has reportedly helped finance its activities. In addition, Israel’s religious conservative parties are a necessary component in the coalition government and their extreme behavior is tolerated and even aided and abetted on the sly. Nor will secular Jews stand up for their Christian brothers in Israel in enough numbers to matter. Also, many Israelis believe that increasingly hardline radical Jewish groups are actually the future of Israel based on demographic trends. All excuses aside, clearly enough of the ruling elite in America, and in Israel, support the radical settlers, or none of this would be happening.

And the situation is little better for Christians in Palestine outside Jerusalem. A Franciscan monk visitor to a monastery outside of the city reported how the Israeli authorities had cut off water to the building while the missionaries themselves were verbally abused and had rocks and other debris hurled at them by settlers. In Bethlehem, a Christian gift shop was deliberately put out of business after nearby Jewish settlements were allowed to erect walls [blocking access to it](#). Other attacks on Christians [have included](#) a June 2015 arson incident at the Church of the Multiplication and a nearby Benedictine monastery in Tabgha, located 120 miles north of Jerusalem. The church is built on the site where Christ fed the 5,000 through the multiplication of loaves and fishes. The attackers left Hebrew graffiti on the walls, reading “all idols will be smashed.” In 2014 occurred vandalization of a Romanian Orthodox church, the Benedictine Abbey of the Dormition, and Catholic offices in Jerusalem, as well as a monastery in Beit Shemesh. The year before, more than 20 Christian sites of the Latin Patriarchate were attacked by vandals. And in 2012, a Trappist monastery in Latroun was subject to arson and graffiti, while the Convent of St. Francis on Mt. Zion was vandalized. Non-Jews in Bethlehem and on the West Bank meanwhile live under a system of Israeli military laws and check points established by government order number 101. In Hebron, non-Jews living on Jewish-only streets cannot even walk out their front doors and they are regularly bombarded by feces and other waste hurled down upon them by the settlers.

Israel’s anti-Christian policies are international and includes support of groups the US has called terrorists. Israel has given money and weapons to the jihadists fighting against Syria’s Bashar al-Assad, which includes al-Nusra Front, an al-Qaeda affiliate. Wounded jihadists even have crossed into Israel to received hospital treatment. Once, ISIS accidentally fired into Israel and then publicly apologized. Israel is intent on removing al-Assad, which will lead

to an exodus of Christians from Syria, similar to what took place in neighboring Iraq after US forces deposed Saddam Hussein.

There is a certain irony in how the United States doggedly pursues China over its alleged maltreatment of the Uighurs while at the same time rewarding and protecting Israel even though it spies relentlessly on the US and very clearly persecutes Palestinians. Dreher asks the question why the US government, which gives Israel multiple billions of dollars a year, cannot stop Israel's *de facto* official punishment of its Christians. The answer is at least in part simple, that most American Christians do not care about the plight of their co-religionists in the Middle East. Millions of true-blue Christians not unlike Dreher, many weaned on the Scofield Bible and its dispensationalism, and many of whom wind up in government or other positions of power, choose to disengage from the problem, accepting that Jews are the "chosen people" of God and, for some, part of End Time prophecy. They are therefore to be given a pass by both the media and government on all their exclusivism and bad behavior even as they meddle in US politics and work to hobble freedom of speech by criminalizing anyone who criticizes Israel or supports Palestinians by urging a boycott against it. Until all that changes, if it even can happen, Christians in the so-called Holy Land will be on the chopping block and when the churches and monasteries no longer have a community to sustain them, it will be the end of Christianity in the place where it was born. And more's the pity, the United States will have played a major role in enabling that to happen.

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