



*Centre for Mediterranean, Middle East and Islamic Studies*

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## **Interview with the Ambassador of Palestine in Athens, Marwan Emile Toubassi**

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*The interview was conducted by Zakia Aqra and Raffaele Borreca*

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**Q: What is your opinion, and the opinion of the PA [Palestinian Authority] regarding the persecution of Christians in the Middle East?**

**A:** Well, it's obvious that Daesh (ISIS) are a real danger, not only for Christians in the Middle East but for Muslims as well, for the national aspirations of the Arab world; particularly in the Middle East where Christians and Muslims have been together for centuries over here [in the Middle East]. We were over here in the Middle East, since 2000 years and then the Muslims came and since that time we were living together, very peacefully [...] good relation[s]. The Christians, the Arab Christians in the Middle East are part of the Islamic culture that we are living in, in the Middle East and in [the] Arab countries. So I don't think that ISIS has anything to do with the Arab culture and what they are doing, of course, we know that there are some bodies [entities], I don't know, countries, organizations, behind the ISIS and there is a political reason of what is going on in the Middle East with ISIS. ISIS is a tool for implementing [a] political agenda in the Middle East. First, to destroy the national state as a state in the Arab countries and second, to give more power to Israel as a state and to mobilize and colonize the sources of oil in the Middle East, in terms of [the] continuation of the benefit of the petrol-dollars for other countries. But there is a danger, more danger let's say, in what'[s] going [on with] the existence of the Christians in the Middle East. Christians are floating out of [fleeing] Iraq and Syria, and... well, before they floated out of [fled] Lebanon as well, due to many circumstances that have happened over there. Personally, I do think that the existence of Arab Christians in the Middle East was targeted from years and years ago. Some people, some powers do not want that... they don't want or they don't like the existence of Arab Christians in the Middle East. Maybe this serves the idea- the theory of the Talmud [of the] Jewish people that some of the conservatives in the American administration believe in and the Christian Zionists over there- that at the end there will be the Armageddon between the 'Good' and the 'Evil'. The 'Good' will be the Jewish and the Christians in the West, and the 'Evil' will be the Muslims. So, they don't want Arab Christians over here [in the Middle East]. And let me tell you something: when the Crusaders invaded the Middle East and the Arab world, centuries ago, the number of Arab Christians who were killed by the Crusaders were maybe the same or more as the Muslims at that time. So the

Arab Christians were targeted as well at that time by Crusaders because [the Crusade] [had] nothing to do with Christianity as a religion. So [its] all a political agenda, either by the Crusaders or by ISIS; different tools maybe, for the same agenda.

**Q: The second question would be whether the Arab Christians in Palestine (West Bank and Gaza), are endangered; particularly in reference to Hamas policy? And if there is a risk of spillover?**

**A:** Hamas is not ISIS. Hamas is something different. ISIS is fighting Hamas in Yarmouk camp and they are trying to organize some organizations in Gaza, against Hamas as well. But we -in the Palestinian Authority- have always been interested in the existence of Christians in Palestine. Especially, [because] I think that we are not a minority in Palestine. The Christians are a genuine part of the Palestinian people as well as of the Arab communities in the Middle East. We have... give[n] much to the Arab civilization in different sectors, in different fields. In Palestine the Christians were genuine part of the national movement as well since the 1936 and even before and after and up till now of course. The Christians are represented in all political organizations and the structure of the Palestinian Authority in the State of Palestine: in the Palestinian National Council, in the Palestinian Executive Council of the PLO, in the Central Council, in the Parliament, in the municipalities. There are some bylaws that take into consideration the representation of Christians; which do not abide with the number of the Christians represent[ed] in percentage. We are given -as Christians- much more representation by quota bylaws, which is very important [in order] to keep Christianity there, to keep the image in Palestine that Christians and Muslim... this is our Land. It's for Christians and for Muslims, and we are defending our nation, we are defending our people against occupation. All over the years of history, of Israeli occupation, they have targeted Christians as well as Muslims. They have targeted the churches, the monks, as well as mosques and Muslims. We are facing the same issue: we are Palestinians at the end of the day, we are Palestinian Christians, as there are Palestinian Muslims. So we are a genuine part, regardless of our percentage of [the] population... out of the ratio of the population. Of course there is a decline, unfortunately, of the percentage of Christians among the Palestinian population, but this is due to migration of course, and Muslims are migrating as well, due to the restrictions and occupation policies. Occupation is a crime against the people, a crime against the State, a crime against humanity as well and that's why many people are looking for job, for security and they can't find this under occupation. That's why Palestinians are migrating to the Gulf, to Europe, to North or South America. Taking into consideration that the Christians are less than the Muslims in Palestine, it shows that there are much of [Christian] Palestinian in percentage emigrating. But that is not true because Muslims are emigrating as well.

**Q: Do you feel [think] that there might be some Salafi elements, like ISIS within Palestine...?**

**A:** I can't predict what the future will bring, but of course ISIS is a danger, of course, and what's going, as I told you, in the Arab world... demolishing the churches, the massacres taking place against Christians over there, and against some Muslims of course in Iraq [and] Syria as well by ISIS. They should be stopped and there should be an end of this mentality that has nothing to do with Islam in my opinion, because this is not Islam, this is not Christianity as well. But I think that it should be stopped by international responsibility because it's a

danger against humanity as well, it's not a danger against either the Palestinians, or the Iraqis or the Syrians or Christians. This is against all the human values, this is against the civilization what's going on in different places. But now, what worries me, I wonder why they are not stopped.

**Q: What is the relationship between the Palestinian Authority and the Churches in the Holy Land?**

**A:** We consider ourselves, the Christians, a genuine part of the Palestinian community, of the Palestinian people. The churches belong to us, the Christians over there, as [well as] mosques of course. The Palestinian Authority takes care of the churches, the relation with the Churches, the representations of the Churches. The Christians are part of the Minister of Religious Affairs, not as [in] Jordan or Egypt for example. When I started my work with the Palestinian National Authority, late Yasser Arafat called me and asked me to go and create... establish a directorate of Christian affairs in the Minister of Religious Affairs. I was surprised, I told him "Well, Abu Ammar, you're telling me to go and work in the Ministry of Waqf and Islamic Religious Affairs? you know that I'm Christian" and [he] said "Of course that I know that you're Christian, and one of the leaders of the Christian community in Palestine, even of the Palestinian people, but you don't remember, you don't know that I named this ministry the Ministry of Religious Affairs only ? It is not the Islamic Religious Affairs, we are not in any other country, we are in Palestine! So go and establish a directorate for Christian affairs in the Ministry of Religious Affairs." Since that time, or even before, Abu Ammar took care of the Palestinian [Christians], he considered [them] very much, always he was talking of the Christian Sites before talking of the Muslim Shrines and Sites in Palestine. To defend Jerusalem, with its Christian Shrines and its Muslim Shrines. This is a famous sentence of Yasser Arafat. As I told you, in the municipality [and] in the Parliament, there is a quota for the Christians to be represented. This is what keeps of course the Christian representation in all the Palestinian organizations and the structure of the Palestinian National Authority. And to tell you something, we have a presidential committee - that was established with a presidential decree by President Mahmud Abbas - Higher Committee for the Churches Affairs in Palestine. This Committee consists of Muslims and Christians as well, some ministers, some ex-ministers. I was a member of this committee for a period of time. They take care of all the relations [between] the Church and the Palestinian Authority. We are always there, as Palestinians, as officials, in all Christian ceremonies, all Christian masses. And of course you remember when Yasser Arafat used annually to go and attend the Christmas Mass in Bethlehem, and up till now President Mahmud Abbas is doing that. Even we invite Presidents of the world to come and attend the Christmas Mass, and some foreign ministers who come with President Mahmud Abbas or used to come with the late President Yasser Arafat, to attend the Christmas Mass and we are part of the reception that is held at Christmas time in Bethlehem. There is no difference between Christians and Muslims in Palestine: we are all Palestinians. And of course the head of the Authority, the PLO take this into consideration. We have heads of Palestinian organizations who are Christians. For example the Democratic Front for the Liberation of Palestine was headed by Nayef Hawatmeh. Nayef Hawatmeh is Christian. The PFLP was headed by Dr. George Habash. George Habash is Christian. We have the vice-President of the Palestinian National Council, who is [an] Orthodox priest. So there is nothing called Muslim and Christian in Palestine. In Palestine we are all Palestinians, whether we are Christians or Muslims.

**Q: Inside the Christian community in Palestine, how do you see the relationship between the Patriarchate, the Church Hierarchies and the Christian people, regarding to the scandals?**

**A:** This is something else. This has nothing to do with the relations with the Palestinian Authority. These are internal issues within the Church itself. Yes, there are some problems, of course. [...] There is a miscommunication between the spiritual leadership of the Church and the community. Of course we have different Christian sects in Palestine; we have Orthodox, Protestants, Catholics, Evangelicals. We have all Christian communities represented in Palestine, even in Jerusalem we have Russian Orthodox, and we have Romanian Orthodox Church, and we have Copts from Egypt, and we have Syrian Orthodox, and Syriac Catholics. All the Christian churches are represented in the capital, the eternal capital of Palestine, which is Jerusalem. The eastern part [of Jerusalem should be] the capital of the Palestinian State. In terms of talking of our Orthodox Church, there is a law that mobilizes the relation between the spiritual leadership and the community. For different reasons, maybe parts of this law, the law number 27/48 1958, the law of the Jerusalem Patriarchate of Jerusalem is not all implemented and now there is a dialogue going on between the Arab Orthodox Council in Palestine [and] the Church and has been observed by the Committee that I talked about, the Presidential Committee. I think things should go on for the benefit of the Orthodoxy in Palestine, for the benefit of keeping our properties in Palestine, for the benefit of the Church and the Palestinian people. There were some sells, of course and some leasing of properties for long period of time and we have our observations [reservations], but I think that the ongoing dialogue right now, should open new doors of relationship between the spiritual leadership and the community, because -from my point view- the spiritual leadership should represent always the aspirations of its flock, of its community. It's a spiritual leadership, regardless of the nationality. We have nothing against being a Russian or a Greek or a Romanian or an Arab. There should be never a discrimination. What we are looking always forward for is a good shepherd for the community, regardless of his nationality, because religion has nothing to do with nationality, and in our Church of course this is what should go on as a matter of principle.

**Q: How can Greece cooperate with the Palestinian Authority to preserve the Holy places in the Holy Land and for the well-being of the Christians in the Middle East?**

**A:** This is an important question. The question is how to preserve Christianity in the Holy Land and this is very important because I don't like, I don't want, even the Muslims don't like and don't want to see Palestine, after decades, without Christians. Christianity is not only the Church and the stones over there; it is the existence, of [the] sacrificing of Christians in their land, in the Holy Land. This is our land, the land of Jesus, who was born over there. Jesus Christ. So we have to sacrifice our existence over there, we have to be there. This is a responsibility not only for the Palestinian Authority. The Palestinian Authority is doing very much in terms of keeping, helping, monitoring the existence of Christians over there because they are part, as I said, of the Palestinian community. As well, this is part of the responsibility of the Churches all over the world, is part of, and should be part of the responsibility of the Christian community in the West. Not only in Greece, in Russia, in Romania, in Britain, I don't know where. But they should look more seriously for the existence of Christians in the Holy Land, in the Middle East at large as well; through many tools, maybe in helping in housing projects for the Christians and – not only for Christians, even for Muslims and the Palestinian community as well, because we have many projects that are funded

by Christian organizations in the Holy Land that the Palestinian community at large get benefit out of it. For example, I was for ten years head of the Orthodox Association Club in Ramallah and even in Palestine – head of the Orthodox Council in Palestine – and Orthodox clubs in Palestine have Muslim members as well. So when we do something, an activity or a program, the Muslims get benefit out of these programs as well as the Christian over there. So we are targeting the Palestinian community, the needs of Palestinian community to exist under occupation, to fight occupation for the sake of freedom and peace that we want. So they can do many things. First of all, there should be a political stand against occupation of the churches. We have a good stand from the Archbishop of Athens and all Greece. He condemned keeping more than 6,000 prisoners in Israeli jails and he said that this is a sin, I think, and it's against humanity even – don't know what the words exactly – a shame. Many of the Churches now declared their position with the Palestinian aspiration. The Vatican, one week ago, declared its recognition of the Palestinian State. This is very important for the Christians all over the world. This is important for us the Palestinians. There was [the canonization] of two Palestinians. This is very important of course, because Palestinians Christians and Muslims are fighting for peace... fighting for their own existence. This could be even more, by putting pressure on Israel, by the Christian churches and the Christian world and the Christians should [put] more political pressure put on Israel to end its occupation. We are looking forward to live in peace beside Israel, but on a basis that we will have our own independent State on the lands which were occupied in 1967, with East Jerusalem, of course, as its capital. Second, there could be some programs for the benefit of the Palestinian community at large and the Christians as well, as part of the Palestinian community: housing projects, small enterprises, projects that will generate income, that will open new job opportunities for the Christians and Muslims as well in some villages in Palestine... something of this sort I mean... some visits of course to Jerusalem. This would help.

**Thank you so much.**

You're welcome.