

DONALD TRUMP IS COMPLICIT IN A CATASTROPHE FOR CHRISTIANS

By Father Jamal Khader and Rev. Munther Isaac

Israel's West Bank annexation policy, fueled by Trump's 'peace plan,' may gratify extreme evangelicals, but is a mortal blow to the future of Christianity in the Holy Land



While the world is busy fighting COVID-19, Israeli political parties have reached a government coalition agreement. Benjamin Netanyahu has succeeded in bringing annexation of occupied Palestinian territory to the table, setting a provisional timeframe -- less than two months from now. He can thank the Trump plan for the confidence to push annexation so hard and so fast.

There have been many explanations why the Trump Mideast "vision" fell short of even the most basic requirements for a just and lasting peace. But few commentators have analyzed how the Trump plan dealt with the future of Palestinian Christians in particular – and how Israel's annexation plans would affect Christian life in Palestine. Let us be clear: implementing the Trump plan would bring catastrophic consequences for the prospects of a political solution between Israelis and Palestinians, and particularly for the fulfillment of the rights of the Palestinian people, including Palestinian Christians.

The basic principles of the U.S. plan contradict the official position of the Heads of Churches in Jerusalem. In response to the plan's publication, the representatives of Christian churches

actually based here in the Holy Land, and not in D.C., affirmed "our strong devotion to achieving a just and comprehensive peace in the Middle East based on the international legitimacy and the relevant UN resolutions and in a manner that guarantees security, peace, freedom and dignity to all of the peoples of the region."



An Orthodox Christian priest prays by the Church of the Nativity in Bethlehem on April 18, 2020, before the arrival of the "Holy Fire" from Jerusalem's Church of the Holy Sepulchre

Despite the partisan domestic interests of both Mr. Trump and Mr. Netanyahu to frame Israel and Palestine as a religious conflict between the Judeo-Christian tradition and Islam on the other, this is not our lived reality as Palestinian Christians.

Despite references to the significance of the Holy Land to Christians worldwide, Palestinian Christians are barely visible to the plan's architects and make minimal appearances in the document. The Trump plan's drafters seem ideologically troubled by the fact that Palestinian Christians are an inseparable part of the people of Palestine.

The plan's vision for Jerusalem is solely about Israeli hegemony with lip service to Muslim pilgrimage. Christian Palestinians don't exist. The architects' condescending language provides that Muslims who "behave well" can visit Jerusalem, but does not mention Arab Christians, as if we have nothing to do with Jerusalem.

This plan transforms the Holy Land into a "Zionist fairyland" for the enjoyment of extreme Christian evangelicals and Jews, while the local Christian population remains subjugated

under Israel's coercion. In fact, the plan maintains a cruel and artificial separation between two cities with key Christian holy sites – Bethlehem and Jerusalem.

A close look at the plan's map shows the Bethlehem is not given land for its natural growth. But it gives a green light for Israel to annex ancient Christian sites and other vital places for Palestinian Christians, such as the Cremisan Monastery and the Makhrour Valley. Many Palestinian Christians and members of the Church will lose the land they lived in and farmed for generations. It is a mortal blow to a dynamic Christian presence in the birthplace of Jesus.

Another significant aspect is Israel's control over the population registry. Thousands of Palestinian Christians are not allowed to return to their homeland because of Israel's policies. There is already a growing number of families painfully divided between Jerusalem and cities only a few kilometers away such as Bethlehem or Ramallah.

Our churches continuously receive requests for help in family unification cases, or for Palestinians in the diaspora who want to visit their relatives and pray in their holy sites. Israel regularly turns down such requests, in some cases citing "security reasons" that no real democracy would treat as such.

Dismissing international law and basic rules of diplomacy is not a "realistic" solution to the conflict nor does it make peace possible. Rather it deepens the roots of oppression and denial of rights, ensuring Palestine, its land and people, remain perpetually under Israel's control.

Peacemaking is a blessing from God; oppression is a sin. But various U.S. officials are misusing the Holy Bible to justify policies of colonization and the annexation of occupied territory, a crime under international law. People around the world who believe in justice must say, "Enough!" and act accordingly.

There is enough space in Jerusalem for it to be an open city while hosting two capitals and respecting three monotheistic religions' deep connections to it. The illusion that Abu Dis or Kufr Aqab can somehow be turned into the capital of Palestine shows either ignorance about our connection with the city, or simply utter disregard of the rights of the Palestinian people, Christians and Muslims alike.

Israel's current efforts towards West Bank annexation, implementing the Trump plan, will consolidate a status quo that is utterly damaging to the future of Christianity in the Holy Land.

As Christians, we pray and call for all those who care about equality, freedom, and just and lasting peace, to come together to honor the inalienable rights of everyone – including the people of Palestine.

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