

# Behind the desecration of cemeteries and churches in the Holy Land

by Umberto Pascali

On Sunday, April 21, more than 1,000 Palestinians, Christian and Muslim, gathered at the Christian Orthodox cemetery of Bethlehem. They were there to pray together and to strengthen their national unity after one of the most terrible attempts yet to provoke a Muslim-versus-Christian war in Jerusalem and in the other Israeli Occupied Territories. In early March, around 40 tombstones in that cemetery were smashed, the coffins opened, the bodies strewn around and dismembered, the skulls split. The desecration was discovered when the mayor of the city, Elias Freij, went to the cemetery for his brother's funeral. It was "inhuman and unbelievable," Freij told the press. Many other acts of vandalism took place during March, mostly against Christian institutions.

But the rumor was suddenly spread around that this was the work of "Muslim fundamentalist groups" who were responding to the Gulf war and to the appeal for a Holy War against the West—i.e., the Christians. Not surprisingly, this theory was immediately spread by the Israeli authorities and by the newspaper of the Hollinger Corp., the *Jerusalem Post*. "Israeli Defense officials believe that the series of attacks were aimed at Christians by extremist Muslims," the paper wrote maliciously on April 1. "Palestinians rarely admit to differences between Muslims and Christians, stressing that national unity is above religious differences."

It was discovered instead that the attacks had been carried out by a group of drug addicts who practiced a kind of satanic ritual in several Christian cemeteries, mixing up cocaine with pulverized skull bones and smoking it. One of those arrested confessed, as reported by *Yediot Ahronot* on April 2, that he had learned to prepare the mixture of skull bones and cocaine from an "Israeli soldier," and that the soldier had occasionally joined drug parties in the cemetery.

## 'We escaped a war of religion'

"If ever there was an example of what a horrifying situation the Vatican leadership had avoided when, despite pressures, it refused to endorse George Bush's war as a religious war against Islam, that was it. What happened in Iraq could have been only a small part of the hell we would have been precipitated into," a Christian Palestinian intellectual told *EIR*. "Imagine what kind of scenario you would have today

in the Middle East, but also elsewhere—what kind of violence. It was very close. Fortunately, the Pope chose the way of Christ and not that of Bush. It was an attempt to trigger a bloody confrontation between Muslims and Christians in the Holy Places. The Israeli occupation forces are behind it. We Palestinians in the Occupied Territories have escaped a Lebanese scenario, in which the Israeli authorities would have played the role of peacemakers: the guarantor of security and freedom in the Holy Places, and thus somehow the legitimate possessors of those places."

He pointed to a commercial announcement signed by the America-Israel Friendship League, which appeared on April 7 in the *New York Times*. It reads: "Jerusalem is cherished by Jews, Christians, and Muslims. And kept open to all by Israel. . . . King David established it as the capital of his kingdom 3,000 years ago, and Jews have lived there ever since. Today, it is the capital of the modern state of Israel. . . . But only recently has Jerusalem been open to all who cherish it. . . . Israel reunited the city in June 1967, reopened the Holy Places to all religions and guaranteed freedom of access and worship. . . . Only since Jerusalem became the united capital of Israel have its Holy Places been open to people of all faiths."

"This is false propaganda," says Jiryis Khoury, the director of Jerusalem's inter-religious center Al-Liqa. "Under the Israeli occupation, an enormous number of religious places, both Muslim and Christian, have been desecrated. This is not my opinion, it has been reported also by Israeli media. Look what happened at the Holy Sepulchre, when the golden chain on the statue of the Virgin was stolen, or the case of the Al Aqsa mosque, one-third of which was burned on Aug. 21, 1969. Look how many churches, mosques, convents have been desecrated. In 1978, crosses and the golden cover of the Gospels were stolen from the Russian Orthodox Cathedral in Jerusalem.

"In 1983, two Russian nuns were killed in Jerusalem. In 1987, the Orthodox monastery of Jerusalem was closed for nine months. Why? *Yediot Ahronot* reported on April 3, 1987 that the reason was that it had been desecrated by a Jewish fundamentalist group. And what about the massacre of Haram Al Sharif, where 23 unarmed demonstrators were killed by the police? They were trying to prevent the desecration of

the mosque. It is a long list. Look how many mosques have been transformed into bars or night clubs, despite the protests of the Muslim community. Look at the case of the Muslim cemetery of Jaffa: It was dug up, the bodies excavated, because the authorities had decided to widen the road. And there are many more cases.

"The Al-Liqa center has just launched a proposal for Documentation of the Holy Places in Palestine, that would list all the places of worship destroyed from 1948 on. The Holy Places are not now under an authority that can guarantee their security. We believe that the Israeli authorities do not do what they should do under international law. There is not adequate vigilance."

Dr. Khoury also refers to his March 14 meeting with the Pope as part of an inter-faith Palestinian delegation led by the Latin Patriarch of Jerusalem, Michel Sabbah. Following that meeting, Patriarch Sabbah gave a statement "accusing Israel of desecrating holy places" as the *Jerusalem Post* reported. The paper pointed out that the Palestinian delegation had been hosted by the Italian Catholic group *Comunione e Liberazione*, branded as "theologically conservative" and "generally hostile to Israel."

### **Why the drug addicts were protected**

"There has been a dramatic increase in drug use and in thefts and burglaries in the town," Bethlehem's mayor said on April 2. He claimed that police have not done enough to apprehend suspects. There were other provocations, too. A leaflet circulated slandering 40 Bethlehem public figures, Christian and Muslim, as Israeli agents and calling for their "liquidation."

"Who can have an interest in pushing drugs in this way among young Palestinians in the Occupied Territories? Who is able to control the traffic and the flow?" asks a local observer. "This is a very dangerous phenomenon. In my opinion, it may be used by the authorities to undermine Palestinian society. A drug addict can be used very easily for any provocation, having lost any positive identity and become a slave of the drug and whoever supplies it to him."

Thanks to an independent investigation, the drug addicts were identified and six were arrested, but were later released. Says Mayor Freij: "They confessed to using drugs at the cemetery but were not punished and were even released." A police spokesman said, by way of explanation, that "residents who had filed complaints refused to testify against them."

### **Ecumenism of Muslims and Christians**

On Easter Sunday, the Palestinian leaders of Bethlehem and the surrounding area met at City Hall to draft a joint statement. To the deep displeasure of the *Jerusalem Post*, the links between Christians and Muslims have rarely been so good. The newspaper of the Hollinger Corp. wrote the day after, "The statement by the municipality indicates that

the Christian community believes it has more backing now in the Palestinian community at large."

The statement the *Post* refers to reads in part: "In view of the constant criminal attacks on the religious institutions, private and public properties, including the violations of tombs and the desecration of the relics of the dead in the city of Bethlehem, the representatives of the institutions, societies, and a group of citizens hastened to City Hall to discuss the latest events and to take the needed measures to confront this vicious attack and eradicate premeditated acts of damage such as burglaries of religious and educational institutions, commercial stores, car thefts and car burning, drug trafficking and defaming honorable and upright people.

"The participants agree unanimously to denounce and condemn these inhuman and immoral acts which are incompatible with the national interests and which aim at creating chaos and confusion, thereby threatening the safety, security, and dignity of the citizens and violating the sanctity of their Holy Places. The attendants of the meeting call upon the honorable citizens of the Bethlehem area to unite, stand firm together, and resort to caution and prudence against those suspicious and subversive elements that operate in absence of security and stability. The attendants also appeal to public opinion, local and international and to all human rights institutions to urgently intervene."

Mayor Freij underlined that these acts were not to be confused with religious violence. It is the work of "underworld criminals," he said. Jiryis Khoury makes the same point: "This is neither an Islamo-Christian nor a Judeo-Christian problem. The aim is to pull apart Palestinian society. We hear that this is supposedly Muslims attacking Christians. Absolutely not. It is a political plot, and I am sure all the Muslim forces agree with me. The occupying authorities would like, and not just now but from the beginning, to create religious confrontations. We have been able to overcome these attacks. I am sure they will continue, as long as the occupation continues. It may be difficult, very difficult. But the unity of our people is the best weapon we have."

On April 21, a well-known Muslim Palestinian, the director of Public Relations of Bethlehem University, Mousa Darwish, gave a speech at the ceremony at the cemetery. "As a Muslim," he said, "I cannot believe that Muslims are capable of desecrating Holy Places, either Muslim or Christian. And if one or more Muslims have taken part in these actions, this does not mean that this has anything to do with Islam. We Muslims and Christians must both be prepared to face different attempts by the occupying forces that want to divide our unity, our society, and our communities. We say no to these drug addicts, be they Christians, Muslims, Jews or whatever else. No to the occupation! Yes to National Unity!"

That same day, the crowd that moved from there to the Latin cemetery found a new tomb opened and desecrated. For the Israeli authorities, the culprits are "unknown."