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## Interview: Bishop Riah El-Assal

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# Christians Under Israeli Occupation

*The Right Reverend Bishop Riah Abu El-Assal was born in Nazareth, and has been the Bishop of the Episcopal (Anglican) Church in Jerusalem and the Middle East, Diocese of Jerusalem, since 1997. Bishop El-Assal was interviewed by Edward Spannaus during the Holy Land Ecumenical Foundation conference in Washington, on Oct. 23.*



**EIR:** Bishop El-Assal, can you describe the relations between the Christians and the Muslims in Palestine?

**El-Assal:** In my opinion the relationship between the Muslims and Christians has been a cordial one. We have lived side by side for 1,400 years. There were some individual cases of clashes. It is unfortunate that we have suffered at the hands of perhaps non-Arab Muslims, as well as when the Crusades came to Jerusalem, we had it bad. Whereas, under or with the Muslims of the Arab nation, we have always had a very good and cordial relationship. . . .

**EIR:** Why are so many Palestinian Christians now leaving the area?

**El-Assal:** Palestinian Christians left the country—we made up about 23% of the population some 60 years ago—as a result of the ongoing conflict. First, many of them were either encouraged to leave, or expelled, with the rest of the refugees who are in the majority Muslims, in 1948. Second, those who fell under Israeli rule were discriminated against in different ways, by different means. The question of land expropriation caused many to lose hope. The fact that many wanted to pursue higher education, but did not succeed, either because of the expense, or because they were not admitted to a certain field of study, so they sought to study abroad, and studying abroad caused some of them not to come back. Others left the country seeking better opportunities for work, knowing that they were, in Israel, last hired and first fired.

And the fact that many of the Christians who came over the years, did not relate to Arab Palestinian Christians. They have seen us as guardians of the Holy Places, rather than as a community, caring that there are so many alive in our liturgies, and our worship, and our schools and our hospitals. And

so, many got fed up. We are not guardians of Holy Places, so we had better leave the country, [some people decided].

One other factor, the fact that some Arab Palestinian Christians thought that they belonged to the West, not the East, and this came with the rise of the missionary enterprise. See how they name us, as Christians: You will hear of the Greek Orthodox, and what comes to mind is Greece. Then you have the Roman Catholic, and what comes to mind is Rome. We, the Anglicans: What comes to mind is the Church of England. They made us even think we were English, or English-like. The Southern Baptists—the Southern Baptist school in Nazareth—exported hundreds of students to the United States, and those hundreds did not come back. Therefore, they belong to Atlanta, Georgia; they don't belong to Nazareth.

Equally true with the Roman Catholics who went to Italy and France. Our people went to England. The Lutherans went to Germany. It's unfortunate; they made us not only think West, but head West. This explains why the Arab Christians, or the Arab Palestinian Christians, in particular, have emigrated. But the bulk of them, the majority of them, found themselves as refugees in the neighboring countries, in 1948. . . .

**EIR:** After the 1967 War, and the subsequent occupation, did the emigration accelerate?

**El-Assal:** The emigration accelerated as a result of Israeli rule. In Jerusalem in 1967, we had 28,000 Christians; today we have about 8-10,000 at the most—in my opinion, 8,000, though some believe there may be 10,000. The Christians in Bethlehem, Beit-Sahour, Beit-Jala, Ramallah, Nablus—the last 30 years caused many to leave, as a result of the inhuman way of dealing with the Palestinians.

The occupation does not distinguish the Arab Palestinian Christian from the Arab Palestinian Muslim. The occupation reaches all of us in the areas occupied by Israel, in their homes, in their workshops, on the streets, at check-points, in their jobs, and as a result they found their way somewhere [else] in the world.

Others, who were Jerusalemites, had their IDs taken from them by Israel, because they happened to reside outside the area, the municipal area of Jerusalem, and they lost their citizenship, their residency, and they had no other choice but to find someplace in the world, where they could settle.

**EIR:** You said yesterday that you had a meeting with Prime Minister Tony Blair. . . .

**El-Assal:** Yes, we did. He said they were going to war in Iraq because this will pave the way for peace in the Middle East, that Saddam was afraid, because of the weapons of mass destruction, etc., etc. I turned to him and said: "Mr. Prime Minister, the shortest way to Baghdad was through Jerusalem. Once peace comes to Jerusalem, peace comes to the world."

He kind of smiled, and I said: "I fear also that if you go to

war, you will bring the end of the Christian presence, of your faith, and my faith, in the Middle East.”

**EIR:** Have you attempted to meet with President Bush?

**El-Assal:** A number of times, but so far, we have not succeeded. . . . I think he is surrounded by advisors who tell him that these guys are this kind of a group, etc., etc. Or, the message never reached him, perhaps those around him don't share with him, that the heads of churches, or some of us, would appreciate an audience with him. But we would love to have an audience with the President, whoever the President is, so that we can share with him our pain, our suffering, and our hopes and aspirations for a Middle East completely different from the Middle East that will be, if things remain as they are today.

**EIR:** We have a Presidential election coming up here in about ten days; do you have any hopes that things might change after that?

**El-Assal:** Well, it is difficult to say. The polls say that it is going to be tight, but if there is a change, at least you will get rid of the Christian Right, and their influence on the President. People like Jerry Falwell and the like, who are influencing his mind and activity. Kerry will lead a completely different foreign policy. Foreign policy, it seems, is dictated to the President, rather than initiated by him.

Clinton could have pressured the Israelis to come to terms with the reality of the Palestinian and his right to a state of his own. But the moment he started talking about putting pressure on Israel—and I happened to be in New York on the very day that President Arafat came to meet with him, and President Clinton spoke of the need to persuade or pressure, and what happened? As Arafat was going down the steps from his private plane, someone pulled a drawer out, and presented the world with a case called Monica Lewinsky. And Clinton didn't meet with Arafat. They told him, we will make it difficult for you, if you pursue that road.

**EIR:** You referenced yesterday Pat Robertson's recent visit to Israel. Can you describe what the impact of that is on the Palestinian Christians?

**El-Assal:** Very negative. He came with 4,000 people, they marched the streets of Jerusalem, they hailed the Israeli government and its policy of occupation and building settlements. And warned the Israeli leadership not to give back any of the land, because this land belongs to Almighty God, and Almighty God gave it to you. . . . They challenged Israeli authority not to give back land to the Palestinians, as if this was their sacred right to occupy the land, and build it. They committed themselves to supporting Israel, and the government of Israel, with their lobbying for what Israel is after, and supporting it with funds. I don't know how much they brought with them this time, but I know that Pat Boone once came

with a check for \$15 million, and this was published in the *Jerusalem Post*. Another group came with \$60 million, and said they were committed to raising \$250 million; they handed the \$60 million to the Jewish Agency to help build more settlements in the occupied territories.

**EIR:** When Pat Robertson, or any of these so-called Evangelicals, the Christian Zionists, come, do they make any attempt to meet with the Palestinians?

**El-Assal:** No, to the contrary, they distance themselves from us, and they stay in hotels run by Israeli Jews rather than staying with us, the Arab Palestinian Christians. They don't mingle with us, they don't come to our services. They have their own kind of program, which is aimed at bringing hallelujah and praises to Israel, but they have nothing to do with us, the Christians of the Holy Land.

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Bishop Dr. Munib A. Younan

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## Non-Violence and the Struggle for Justice

*The following are excerpts from a speech by Bishop Dr. Munib A. Younan, the Lutheran Bishop in Jerusalem, to the Holy Land Ecumenical Foundation conference in Washington on Oct. 23. Subheads have been added.*

Dear friends,

It is an honor for me to be attending the Holy Land Ecumenical Conference for the second time. I bring to you the greetings of our Palestinian people and the Lutheran Church, assuring you that our people with the other peoples of the Middle East are yearning for justice and peace.

Oftentimes, the Christian Church is criticized for being prophetic and for promoting struggle, even in a non-violent way. I have heard people criticizing us, church leaders, for speaking out loudly against the Israeli occupation, against spiral violence and injustice. We were asked: “Why do you speak out so frankly? Shouldn't the church just focus on the gospel and leave politics alone!”

I am a Palestinian. My people and I are experiencing injustice and military occupation as well as the accompanying problems of hunger, illness, loneliness, imprisonment and being treated as strangers and intruders in our own land! What is my motivation in speaking out against these evils: Is it my personal or nationalistic feelings, or my political aspirations? No, my motivation is that I feel with my people