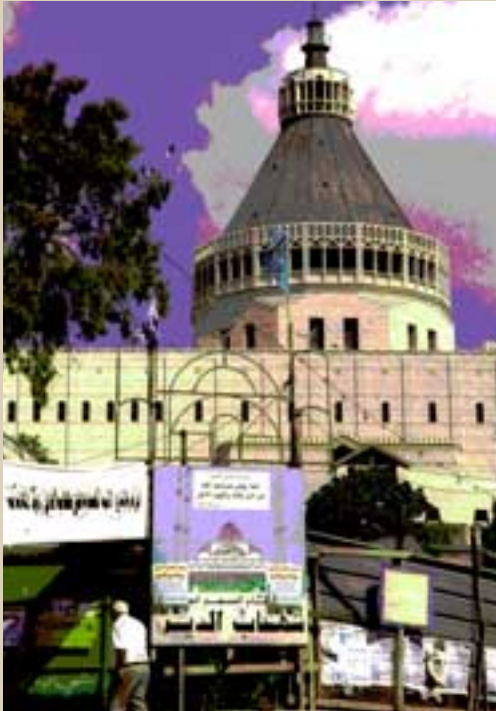


# THE DISPUTES OVER TWO CHURCHES IN THE HOLY LAND

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The disputes over two churches in the Holy Land, as reflected by the public statements of Christian delegates, is closely connected to the diminishing position of Christians in the Holy Land.

After 35 days of siege during April-May of this year, the crisis at the Church of the Nativity in Bethlehem was brought to an end. Thirteen armed Palestinians who were wanted by the Israeli government on charges of acts of terror and murder, were able to leave the country, unharmed, thanks to Israel's willingness and sensitivity to Christian demands worldwide to end the siege on the holy Church.

The stand-off at the Church of the Nativity in Bethlehem has indeed ended, but a grave truth

emerged from it, just as it emerged from other conflicts between Muslims and Christians in the Holy Land. During the confrontation and its critical moments, the representatives of the Christian Church hastened to criticize Israel, while at the same time they were very reluctant, not to say fearful, to denounce the actions of the Palestinians.

Four years after the beginning of the crisis over the site near the Church of the Annunciation in Nazareth, one feels compelled to draw comparisons and conclusions. In light of the declarations of some Church officials, I would like to suggest that the Christian attitude shaped not only the progress of the disputes in question, but also reflects the nature of the



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relationship, or in fact, the “balance of fear” between Christians, Muslims and Jews in the Holy Land. Comparing the public statements of the representatives of the Holy See is very telling and worth sharing with the public.

### In Bethlehem

In Bethlehem, two hundred armed Palestinians stormed into the Church of the Nativity and locked themselves inside, turning the ancient and holy church into a fortification. Among the Palestinians who practically conquered the church, together with its monks, were several senior and wanted terrorists. They had figured, quite rightly, that the Israeli army would be extremely reluctant to pursue them inside the church. On the other hand, in their brutal act they did not show any sensitivity to one of the holiest churches in the Christian world. Nonetheless, Church officials spoke out publicly, criticizing Israel in a clear voice and warning the Israeli authorities not to enter violently into the site of the church. In their public statements, Church officials overlooked the grave desecration of the holy church by armed Palestinians. When an exchange of gunfire occurred between the Palestinians within the church

building and the Israelis outside, Father David Jaeger of the Vatican accused Israel of “a barbaric act, against society and against humanity”. He threatened that an Israeli action would have “a catastrophic effect” on the 1973 agreement between the Vatican and the State of Israel.

### In Nazareth

This is not the first time the Palestinians have desecrated the holiness of churches under their jurisdiction. The use of churches in Beth Jalla as shooting posts aiming at the Israeli neighborhood of Gilo in south Jerusalem, is another example. Nonetheless, the major dispute between Muslims and Christians in the Holy Land erupted in the city of Nazareth, under Israeli jurisdiction, four years ago when Muslim extremists of the Islamic Movement took control of the main plaza in Nazareth, in close proximity to the Church of the Annunciation, turning it into an outdoor mosque. In this flagrant infraction, the Muslim extremists prevented the implementation of the original plan of the municipality, to turn the land into an open plaza for the public and pilgrims expected in Nazareth in the year of the Millennium. The Muslim extremists erected a large tent and turned it into an outdoor temporary mosque,

named after “Shihab al-Din” whose tomb is allegedly situated in the corner of the square. The Muslims ignored the law, turning the site into a center of incitement against Christianity and against the West. Several Muslims attacked Christian pilgrims on their way to the Church of the Annunciation, and on Easter 1999, Muslim hooligans attacked Christian residents of the city and damaged their property.

Following the belligerent take-over of the site near the Church of the Annunciation, the Israeli government sought a court order to evacuate the Muslims from the plaza, but the legal process ended only in October 1999, when the court repudiated all Muslim claims over the land. The conflict between Christians and Muslims escalated, paralyzing the municipality of Nazareth, and forcing the Israeli government to intervene in the dispute. Two previous governmental committees had approved the building of a mosque in the plaza, in order to guarantee the peacefulness of the historical visit of Pope John Paul II in Israel in the year 2000. Recently, the Muslims decided, again, to take matters into their own hands and in November 2001 they began building the mosque without legal approval of the planning authority.

In early March 2002, the present government decided to revoke the previous resolutions, concluding that no mosque would be built in the land near the Church of the Annunciation.

As a coordinator of the recent governmental committee dealing with the dispute in Nazareth, I watched in amazement as Christian spokesmen refrained from publicly criticizing the Muslim violations of Christian holy places. On the other hand, severe public condemnations were addressed against the Israeli government. Many Christians, who felt strongly against the idea of building a mosque in the disputed plaza in Nazareth, were not willing to speak in public or even to appear in front of the committee. The committee heard

several Christian foreigners, but only one native Christian was willing to appear before the committee. Several others agreed to speak only under the condition that their identity would remain undisclosed. They were afraid to speak out publicly, fearing for their personal security, as a result of a campaign of terror by activists in the Islamic Movement.

### Conclusion

In conclusion, Muslim intimidation has succeeded in silencing representatives of the Christian Church, who were reluctant to criticize in public the Muslim transgressors of law and abusers of their churches, both in Bethlehem and Nazareth. The reluctance of Church

officials to confront Palestinian or Muslim disregard of their holy sites represents a distressing result of the "balance of fear" between Muslims and Christians.

Relations between Muslims, Christians and Jews have known many turns throughout history. The decrease in power of the Christian communities in the Arab world throughout the twentieth century is not a secret. While assessing the falling number and declining status of Christians in the Middle East, one cannot ignore the scenes in which Church officials fear to confront the Muslims in a firm and brave manner while choosing to criticize Israel.

