

HAMAS AND THE CHRISTIAN COMMUNITY

Do pray for Christians caught up in a rapidly changing situation and for those working with both sides to express God's love with a heart for reconciliation. Pray for world leaders as they grapple with the situation – the drive of Iran for nuclear technology, and the question of whether to cut off aid to the Palestinian Authority until its ruling party renounces the aim of destroying Israel. If overseas aid is suddenly cut off, would the Palestinian administration collapse, and what would happen then? Local Christian communities and governments need our prayers more than ever to retain a clear moral compass.

Father, we pray for Christians under the Palestinian Authority – increase them in faith, wisdom, and courage. May they know they are secure in You who holds the whole world in Your hands. Guide our rulers and governments and show them Your way, we pray. Amen

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Hamas – a militant Islamic party – has recently won a landslide victory in the Palestinian elections. While Israel and the international community consider what policies to adopt in response, little attention has been given to the likely impact on the Christian community – a small minority in the West Bank and Gaza.

Bethlehem has the largest Christian community in the West Bank. Already this has shrunk as families under pressure leave for the greater opportunities and freedoms of America and Europe. What effect will the Hamas victory have on those who remain, and on scattered Christians elsewhere in the Palestinian Authority?

The draft constitution of a Palestinian State makes clear in Article 5 that Islam shall be the official religion in Palestine. Article 7 determines that the principles of Islamic Shari'a shall be a major source of legislation. The weight given to these principles is likely to be very different under a militant and disciplined Islamic party than under the largely secular rule of Fatah.

Some Palestinian Christians rejoiced at the downfall of the corrupt leadership of Fatah. Frustrated and angry, some voted to get rid of Arafat's men. They saw the defeat of Fatah as

punishment for corruption and a call to the West to repent of its liberal support for a corrupt regime.

Will what follows be any better for the Christians? Hamas has indicated its priority to control the Interior and Security functions of the new government to be formed. How will this impact dress codes, pressure to wear the Islamic veil, pressure on property-holding by Christians, restriction on trading licenses for Christians and pressure on Christian girls to marry Muslims? Already there is talk of compulsion on women to wear the veil, and extra taxes on non-Moslems. Will these social forces increase the rate of emigration so that Bethlehem ceases to have any significant Christian presence?

Prominent members of the Christian community like Hanan Ashrawi may be offered government positions to give apparent reassurance. Will the Anglican, Catholic and Lutheran Bishops of Jerusalem be as keen to act as agents of an Islamic Party as they were to support the policies of Fatah? What leadership will they give to their flock in Bethlehem, Ramallah, Nablus and Jenin? And how will the newer evangelical fellowships fare, without recognised positions among the traditional church groups?

Underlying all this is a basic question: How does the New Testament instruction of St Paul to obey the ruling authorities apply to Christians under militant Islamic rule? Worldwide, over 50 million Christians live in countries under Muslim majority rule.

Islam is a strongly territorialist religion. It claims that all areas of the Middle East were under Islamic rule and therefore must return to Islamic control. In Iraq the small Christian minority face difficult times – recently there was a series of bomb explosions deliberately targeting churches across the country. Iran is 99% Muslim. President Ahmadinejad reportedly instructed his 30

provincial governors that Christianity should be destroyed. Last week he met with Palestinian militants in Syria where the Higher Command of Hamas is based. Will similar anti-Christian policies apply in the Palestinian territory? What then for Christians in Jordan? In Egypt the Coptic Christians are under pressure from the Muslim Brotherhood. It does not stop there as the Muslim Brotherhood has links in Britain.

Major churches in London sometimes encounter Muslims coming to pray in rooms to lay claim to sacred space for Islam. The aim is clearly territorialist expansion rather than multi-faith sharing. In other areas our multi-culturalist policies – and the preference of immigrant groups to establish their own communities – mean that some towns and parts of cities in this country are effectively under Muslim control. A new set of questions arises in Britain for Christian minorities.

Christians in Gaza at this time face control by a militant Islamic party or a power struggle between competing armed groups. The conflict between armed groups loyal to Fatah's Mohammed Dahlan on the one hand, local gangs and the victorious Hamas leadership on the other, produces a time of anxiety for the small Christian fellowships.

Armed members of the security force in Gaza are predominantly supporters of Fatah. But now Hamas has won the election, Hamas followers expect to be rewarded with their leadership positions. The changeover will not be easy or without resistance. We need to pray for the leaders of Hamas. Will they make the transition from being a terrorist group with an associated system of schools, clinics and welfare payments for their co-religionists, to becoming the controlling party in an administration with international obligations?