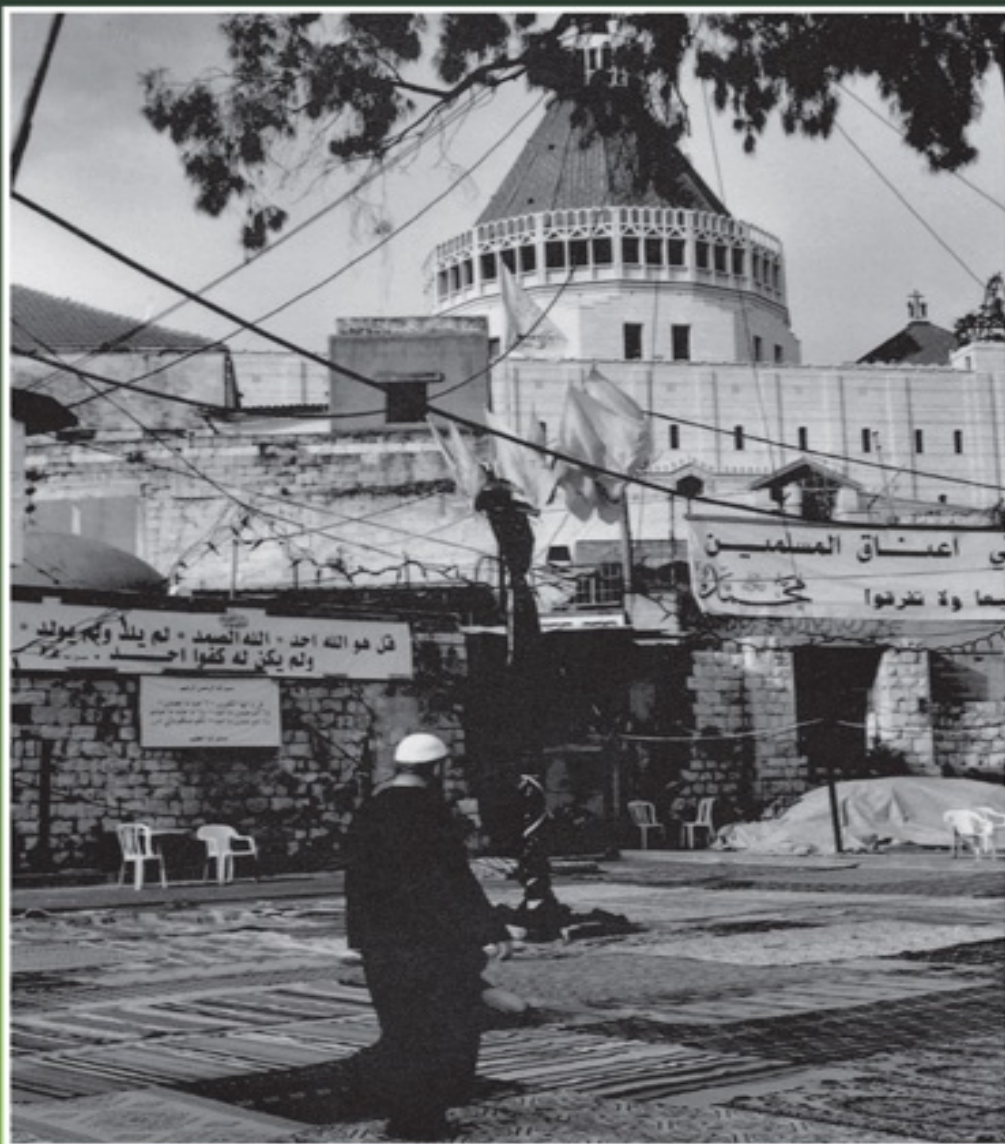


GREEN CRESCENT OVER NAZARETH

*The Displacement of Christians by
Muslims in the Holy Land*



RAPHAEL ISRAELI

Green Crescent over Nazareth: The Displacement of Christians by Muslims in the Holy Land

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**To My Moon
My Sun
The Light of
My Life**

Contents

[Foreword](#)

[Introduction](#)

[1. Nazareth in History](#)

[2. Modern Nazareth](#)

[3. Nazareth in Israel](#)

[4. The Politics of Nazareth](#)

[5. The Rise of the Islamic Movement](#)

[6. Nazareth 2000](#)

[7. The Shihab-a-Din Controversy](#)

[8. A City Paralyzed](#)

[9. The Commission of Inquiry](#)

[10. The Legal Battle](#)

[11. Intra-Arab Politics](#)

[12. Lessons and Conclusions](#)

[Postscript](#)

[Bibliography](#)

[Index](#)

Foreword

This book is about a controversy that has been gripping the Arab community in Israel over the past few years, pitting its growingly combative Muslim majority against the smaller, doubly marginalized Christian minority, which is struggling for survival. While this struggle has been brewing beneath the surface for many years, it has now come to the fore as an open, and often violent conflict, in the context of the Shihab-a Din Affair in Nazareth.

In the first decades of Israel's existence, Arab politics were dominated by either tribal notables, who were themselves protégés of the establishment parties such as *Mapai*, the antecedent of today's Labor (which ruled the country until 1977), or the Christian founders and leaders of the Communist Party who championed the Arab nationalist cause, it being understood that as Marxists they did not have to embrace the Islamic elements of most Arab nationalist movements. However, the Christian founders were gradually pushed to the sidelines by the much faster growing Muslim community that constituted the rank and file of the Party, and young Muslim members climbed the ladder of the leadership and displaced them. Personal jealousies – compounded by a fierce sense of frustration over the loss of their positions – drove the Christians into a position of double alienation: both from their country as an Arab minority and from their fellow (Muslim) Arabs as a Christian, and now displaced, minority among them.

There is no doubt that two powerful parallel processes have precipitated the rift between these two communities and brought it into the open: on the one hand the rise of the Islamic Movement in Israel since the late 1980s, and at about the same time the collapse of communism throughout the world. These two processes were linked, inasmuch as there developed a zero-sum rapport of force between them: the rise of Islam drove away many former communists into the arms of the Islamic parties; and the waning of communism, which had been the bastion of Arab nationalism, encouraged many Muslims into the open arms of the fundamentalists, who came up with a new program to incorporate these lost souls and provide them with new ideological and political anchors.

When Muslim fundamentalists in the city of Nazareth – which had been Christian but is now 70 percent Muslim – invaded the plaza in front of the Basilica of the Annunciation on Christmas Eve in 1997, they signaled that they wanted the majority position of the Muslims to be brought to bear on how local affairs were conducted. Their demands were clear: since they claimed that the plaza was *Waqf* (Holy Endowment) land, they had to enforce a total cessation to the work of paving the plaza, initiated by the Municipality and the Government in order to accommodate the Pope and the millions of pilgrims expected for the Millennium ceremonies, and instead build a mosque on the premises. The grandiose plans advanced by the squatters, to erect a minaret 87 meters high, which would have both dwarfed the Basilica and obstructed the view to it, showed that the plans had been conceived well in advance and revealed that the Islamists thought the opportunity had now come to put them into action.

Previously, a school had occupied that plot of land, which belonged to the Israeli Government, who allowed the Municipality to destroy it in order to make way for the plaza and the

Millennium festivities. As long as the school was in operation, Muslims had never opposed the Millennium plans, but once the plaza was cleared and the work started, the Muslims decided to strike. They feared that if their now-Muslim city were allowed to become the focus of Christian celebrations, which would fix it in world public opinion as a Christian city, their quest to diminish that image might be irreversibly harmed. They said very clearly to this author (who had been appointed a member of the Commission of Inquiry to provide solutions to the rift) that they would rather suffer the economic backlashes of the rift, which would deprive them of tourism and pilgrims, than witness the ongoing encroachment on their cities by world Christianity.

The Israeli Government adopted the process of law and petitioned the courts to order both the evacuation of the squatters from a land that was not evidently theirs, and the demolition of the vast tent-mosque that had been erected illegally on that ground. However, the very fact that the Government was prepared to negotiate with the invaders turned the issue from a simple criminal case of squatting and violation of urban planning laws, into a contentious affair and a *cause célèbre* that attracted the attention of the media and of public opinion throughout the world. In the meantime, two election campaigns took place that helped immobilize the situation: in 1988, the local elections were fought against the background of mounting tension between Muslims and Christians in Nazareth, where the Shihab-a-Din Mosque Project became the key issue and helped the Islamists to gain the majority in the City Council. Then there were the national elections in 1999, in which Ehud Barak from the Labor Party battled to depose the incumbent Prime Minister Netanyahu of the Likud, and was very dependent on the Arab-Muslim vote to achieve his goal.

Indeed, immediately after Barak's election, with the massive support of the Arabs, he set up a ministerial committee that gave its stamp of approval to the building of the mosque, albeit on a reduced scale. But the courts then delivered their judgment in October 1999, which lashed out at the Islamists' claims of ownership as being foundless; but, since the land belonged to the Government, it could formally yield it to whomever it wished. However, the point was not lost on anyone that, by yielding to the illegal squatters, the Government had accepted the rules laid down by the Islamists, who invaded property and used force and threats but were rewarded in the final analysis – something indisputably inimical to the rule of law. Also, by giving up its rights to that plot of land, the Government had unnecessarily aroused the wrath not only of the local Christian denominations, but the whole Christian world, against Israel.

As the pressure from the Christian community built up – involving the Pope himself and President Bush – the Government of Ariel Sharon took up the issue once again and decided to rescind the previous Government's decision and to cancel the construction of the mosque. However, the saga has not ended. Before the Muslims resort to other means, which might explode into violence and bloodshed, they are applying to the Israeli Supreme Court to reverse the Government's decision. More is expected to come. Stay tuned.

RAPHAEL ISRAELI
Jerusalem, March 2002

Introduction

On 21 December 1997, merely four days before the Christmas festivities in the place where it had all begun, Muslim zealots invaded the plaza at the foot of the Basilica of the Annunciation in central Nazareth, fenced it in, declared it a *Waqf* (Muslim Holy endowment land), and set out to erect a mammoth tent as a provisional mosque until their demand that a permanent 86-m minaret mosque be constructed in place is heeded by the authorities. Due to the Muslim Ramadan, the month of fasting, on the one hand, and the approaching Christmas celebrations on the other, the dismayed Israeli authorities elected to attempt to resolve the controversy by peaceful means, thus unwittingly consecrating the illicit *status quo* and complicating the resolution of the issue at hand.

In November 1998, the local elections in Nazareth for the first time resulted in a city council dominated by the Islamic Movement. That not only meant that the main campaign issue – the controversy around the illegal mosque – carried the majority of the vote during the elections, but also that the recently elected mayor, Ramez Jeraysi, might be the last Christian mayor of the city. He will probably also be the last representative of the former communist group ‘Hadash’,¹ and will be replaced by Islamists who are, by definition, anti-communists.

On the eve of the High Holidays in Israel, in September 1999, just days after the Sharm al-Sheikh Accord² was signed by Israel and the Palestinians to relaunch the peace process between them, two car-bombs exploded in the northern cities of Haifa and Tiberias, killing a few innocent passers-by and maiming others. Within days, the Israeli security authorities arrested six Israeli Arabs, all affiliated with the Northern Faction of the Islamic Movement in Israel, who were apparently recruited by the Hamas on the West Bank for the purpose of wrecking both the Accord and the Jewish holidays.

In Nazareth – a Christian city throughout most of its history – the Christians have become outnumbered by Muslims and lost their confidence in their ability to maintain long-term coexistence with their Muslim neighbors. Many of them have left for neighboring Christian villages or for other mixed Israeli cities where they can escape from Muslim hegemony; or they have emigrated, much like the Christians of Lebanon, Bethlehem, and other locations in the Muslim world. For the Christian minority living in Israel this signals either that the Jewish state is unable or unwilling to protect them any longer; or that the Israeli authorities, being themselves menaced by growing Islamic fundamentalism, as exemplified in the car-bombings, would rather resolve their own problem before they turn to the plight of the Christians.

Be that as it may, the data are clear and the fate of the city has been decided: Nazareth will become soon a Muslim city. And, though it is part of Israel and the central government in Jerusalem can still wield some influence, mainly via the power of the purse, still on the local government will affect major decisions concerning holy places, urban priorities, city planning, and whether it is possible for non-Muslims to live in the intensely Muslim ambiance reigning today. A long shadow may fall on the future of the remaining Christians in the community. The writing has long been on the wall, but the Israeli authorities have elected to ignore it in order not

to antagonize the Muslim majority among Israeli Arabs; therefore, the Christians have had no other recourse but to scrutinize the attitudes of their Muslim neighbors and hope for the best. However, now that the events of Nazareth, Haifa and Tiberias have converged to illustrate what lies ahead, maybe new measures will be taken to reduce the emerging danger.

To prevent any misinterpretation of the above, the 'emerging danger' does not refer to the Muslim population in Israel in general, which now has passed the one million mark. For the most part, though it is difficult to gauge their sentiments, they embrace a quietist attitude towards Israel, enjoying the benefits they draw from their Israeli citizenship, and refraining from overt acts of disloyalty towards it. Indeed, they are on record as condemning the recent acts of violence by Islamists, and are wary not to rock the rather comfortable boat which they have boarded willy-nilly. However, to counter the current misconception that they are 'loyal' to their country, especially following the violent events of October 2000, one has to remember that there is near-consensus among them with regard to shunning Independence Day celebrations in Israel and terming that day as the *Nakbah* (Disaster). They also automatically side with their Palestinian brethren whenever Israel is in confrontation with them; and they express desires for, or take practical steps towards, autonomy. This quietist majority among Muslims also identifies itself as Palestinian more than Israeli, and regards itself as a national – rather than ethnic, linguistic or religious – minority in Israel. All these perceptions and self-perceptions are pregnant with potential for dissent, unrest, disobedience and hostility; but, as long as they do not transcend the boundaries of legality, no harm is done.

The Islamic Movement has already been mentioned as one group among Islamists (as they shall be referred to from this point, rather than as Muslims). This has grown by leaps and bounds since the 1980s, and has by now imposed its presence not only culturally but also politically, both in intra-Arab and in Israeli national politics. Prior to the local elections of November 1998, the Islamic Movement split between the Southern Faction and the Northern Faction. The former is headed by Sheikh Abdallah Darwish, the founder of the Movement, who has opted for joining Israeli national politics. The more radical Northern Faction is led by Sheikh Ra'id Salah, the Mayor of Umm al-Fahm, who has chosen the course of isolating his constituents in Islamic enclaves within Israel and has remained adamant in his support of the Hamas and other fundamentalist Muslim movements. It is Salah's faction which has engendered the acts of sabotage mentioned above, but one fears that the general atmosphere of violence created by these acts, and the high prestige the perpetrators enjoy among their peers, might encourage others to join the circle of terror.

The Nazareth Islamists are institutionally connected to the more peaceful Southern Faction, but the confrontational atmosphere which is growing between them on the one hand, and the Christians and the Israeli authorities on the other, may well prompt the hot-headed among them to open hostility and violence. Already, since the initial development of the Nazareth crisis, a number of violent clashes have taken place between Christians and Islamists in the city which have necessitated police intervention. But, although it is difficult to apportion blame for these skirmishes where tempers were high on both sides, it is a fact that the Christian mayor has since had to hire bodyguards to accompany him everywhere, while the confident Islamist leaders can stroll around the city as carefree as before.

An attempt will be made in the following pages to draw in broad strokes the story of Nazareth in modern times, especially as part of British Mandatary Palestine since the end of the First World War, and then as part of the State of Israel since 1948, when the demographic balance began to shift in favor of the Islamists. Then, the growth of the Islamic Movement in Israel,

especially since the 1980s, will be explained in terms of its influence on present-day Nazareth politics and the current controversy between Christians and Islamists which has brought City Hall and the city council to a standstill and generated tensions which threaten to erupt into open violence. Finally, some possible ways to ease the situation will be explored.

Notes

- 1 The old Communist Party in Israel changed its name twice. First, it became 'Rakah' (an acronym for the 'New Communist List'); then, it became 'Hadash' ('The Democracy and Equality Front'). This is the name used for the party during the period under survey in this book. Whenever the party is discussed in terms of its ideology it is usual to either refer to it as 'Communist' or hyphenated as 'Communist-Rakah' or 'Communist-Hadash'.
- 2 The Sharm a-Sheik Accord was signed between Israel and the Palestinians in the resort town of that name in the Sinai, in September 1999, just three months after the election of Ehud Barak as Prime Minister. The Accords were witnessed by President Clinton and President Mubarak, and were intended to restart the stalled peace process.

1.

Nazareth in History

Nazareth is an ancient city in northern Israel, inhabited by a mixed Muslim and Christian population of just over 60,000 (in the year 2000). It is comfortably situated on the slopes of the 350-m-high hills of the Lower Galilee, at the foot of Nabi Sa'in mountain. Its historical nucleus is located around the market area, which today constitutes its commercial center and is mostly characterized by old houses, a dense pattern of settlement and narrow alleys. Its development has been seriously checked by the growth of the nearby Jewish city of Upper Nazareth, which was built at the end of the 1950s in order to balance the Arab demographic majority in that part of the country. Ever since, the new Nazareth, which will remain outside the scope of this book, has taken over the central role of historical Nazareth both as the seat of regional government and as an industrial park.

Old Nazareth has, nevertheless, remained a world-renowned center of tourism and pilgrimage due to its Christian holy sites, foremost of which is the famous Basilica of the Annunciation, and much of its economic activity revolves around the tourist industry. As the center of a largely rural area, Nazareth is also the market and distribution hub for much of the agriculture production of the surrounding Arab villages. Some of the local industry specializes in food processing, while other breadwinners find their livelihood in services (commerce, transportation, electricity, water and other public services), or in skilled craftsmanship, particularly in stone and wood. Local development has gradually weaned the population from heavy dependence on outside work markets. Even local intellectuals, who used to seek employment outside their native city in teaching or managerial jobs, have in the course of the years been absorbed into the city bureaucracy and business establishments.

Nazareth and its Derivatives

Nazareth is mentioned in the New Testament both as the place where Joseph the carpenter settled and the Christ's mother conceived him. As long as stories are rooted in the solid history of Nazareth, events and myths relating to that city can be sorted out and crystallized into the hagiography of the Messiah. But, when Christian exegesis finds antecedents in the Old Testament heralding the coming of the Christ and relate the earthly Nazareth to the visions of the Prophets, one gets into the slippery and controversial domain of dogma and belief. Indeed, one reads in Matthew's Gospel: 'And [Joseph] being warned by a dream, he withdrew to the region of the Galilee, there he settled in a town called Nazareth. This was to fulfill the words spoken through the Prophets: "He shall be called a Nazarene"'.¹ In the Hebrew translation 'Nazarene' is rendered *Notzri*, that is a follower of Jesus of Nazareth, thus relating the story of a Christ that is

foretold by the Prophets to an existing city called Nazareth. Here no specific Prophet is cited, but when we go to Lamentations and to Amos, we read: '[Zion]'s Nazarites [not Nazarenes] were purer than snow';² and 'I raised up prophets from your sons, Nazarites from your young men ... But you made the Nazarites drink wine and said to the Prophets: "You shall not prophesy"'.³ In both citations, the Hebrew original speaks about *Nazir*, which has nothing to do with Nazareth, either etymologically or morphologically, and simply refers to a 'monk'. In biblical Hebrew a *nazir* was someone who took upon himself corporal and dietary restrictions connected with vows (*nedarim*) that were limited in time. For example, for the duration of the vow one cannot consume wine or even grapes, must grow wild hair and not approach the dead.⁴ The very term *nazir* derives from *nezer* [*rosh*], the hair growth that characterizes the monk. Both quotations above certainly refer to this type of monk if one judges by the context of purity (in Lamentations) and drinking wine (in Amos). Another traditional biblical explanation identifies *nezirim* as leaders and notables who, in the context of Lamentations were 'purer than snow'.⁵

We have noted above that the term 'Nazarene' in the New Testament was used to mean the Old Testament 'Nazerite' only in this one context which foretells the coming of the Messiah. In Acts, where Paul is called 'a ringleader of the sect of the Nazarenes', the Hebrew translation also speaks of the sect of *Notzrim* (Christians),⁶ the derogatory appellation of the early Christians as will be explained below, which derived from their origins in Nazareth, but was not connected with the ancient biblical *Nezirim* that will be consistently translated as 'Nazerites' in all other instances and has no relationship to Nazareth. So, all the references in Numbers,⁷ and Judges in the context of Samson's story,⁸ and certainly in Amos and Lamentations cited above, deal exclusively with the issue of ascetism, which was later developed in Christianity by various ascetic orders; but that is a different story. Incidentally, the only other extant use of 'Nazarene', apart from these two citations in Matthew and Acts, is the modern Nazarener, the nineteenth-century Germanic school of art (in Germany, Austria and Switzerland) which rebelled against the conventional wisdom of the time and strove to revive religious Christian art.⁹

It seems that the first followers of Jesus were called Nazarenes after the name of their city, and that this appellation was derogatory.¹⁰ According to the New Testament, when Nathaniel was told about Jesus of Nazareth, he exclaimed: 'Can anything good come from Nazareth?'¹¹ In Hebrew and in Arabic the word 'Christianity' (from the Greek *Christos* – the Anointed One) and its derivatives have maintained the ancient terminology relating that faith to Nazareth: in Hebrew, *Natzrut* for the faith, and *Notzrim* for its followers; in Arabic, *Nasraniya* and *Nasara*, respectively.¹² In non-Christian sources, Nazareth is mentioned in the third century AD, and it certainly remained a Jewish town into the fourth century AD.¹³ Even thereafter, during the slow process of its Christianization and of the differentiation between fledgling Christianity and its Judaic roots, a Jewish population remained in that city under transition. For example, under the foundations of the Basilica of the Annunciation, the vestiges of a fifth-century church were found laying immediately above what seems a Judeo-Christian synagogue. Scholars assume that it must have been a church erected by Constantine for Christians of Jewish origin, or that an ancient synagogue was converted to a church.¹⁴ Only in 614 AD, when Jews from Nazareth and its surroundings joined the Persians in their battle against the Byzantines, did the Jewish presence there come to an end, since the town lay in ruins¹⁵ and there after its remaining population was Christian under Muslim rule.

However, in Christian tradition the preponderant role of Nazareth as the cradle of Christianity kept growing even as the Jewish presence there was dwindling. For the Jews did not preserve

any memory of that backwater town which they had not held in high regard at the time of Christ, beyond the constant reminder that the Nazarenes (Christians) owed their name to that city. By contrast, the Gospels and the Acts are replete with references to Nazareth – especially the construct ‘Jesus of Nazareth’¹⁶ (in Hebrew, *Yeshu’a Hanotzri/mi-Natzrat* = Jesus the Christian/from Nazareth) – which henceforth would inexorably link that city with Christianity for the next two millennia. Above all, it is the moving account in Luke of Christianity’s beginnings in Nazareth¹⁷ which has spiritually tied every Christian believer throughout the generations, to the place where it had all begun. Luke tells us:

In the sixth month the angel Gabriel was sent from God to a town in Galilee called Nazareth, with a message for a girl betrothed to a man named Joseph, a descendant of David; the girl’s name was Mary. The angel went in and said to her: ‘Greetings most favored one! The Lord is with you’. But she was deeply troubled by what he said and wondered what this greeting might mean ... Then the angel said to her: ‘Do not be afraid Mary, for God has been gracious to you; you shall conceive and bear a son, and you shall give him the name Jesus; he will be great. He will bear the title ‘Son of the Most High’; the Lord God will give him the throne of his ancestor David, and he will be king over Israel for ever; his reign shall never end.’ ‘How can this be?’ said Mary, ‘I am still a virgin.’ The angel answered: ‘The Holy Spirit will come upon you and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; and for that reason the holy child to be born will be called “Son of God”’ ... ‘Here I am,’ said Mary, ‘I am the Lord’s servant; as you have spoken so be it.’ Then the angel left her.

Mary indeed conceived, and when she arrived at Bethlehem with her husband she gave birth to her child there, and then returned to Nazareth. Luke tells us that ‘the child grew big and strong and full of wisdom; and God’s favor was upon him.’¹⁸ After a stay in Jerusalem, Jesus returned to Nazareth and continued to live under his parents’ authority. In Luke’s words: ‘His mother treasured up all these things in her heart. As Jesus grew up he advanced in wisdom and in favor with God and men’¹⁹ The Basilica of the Annunciation, the holiest shrine in Nazareth for the past millennium and a half, is constructed on the grotto where Gabriel is supposed to have appeared to Mary to announce the birth of her son. Another church, called St Joseph’s, was built in 1912 on the ruins of an older thirteenth-century church that had been erected on the supposed location of Joseph’s carpentry shop. St Gabriel’s Church which dates from the eighteenth century, stands erect besides the water spring that feeds into St Mary’s Well. The ‘Synagogue’s Church’, built in 1877, a Graeco-Catholic structure, stands over the ruins of the ancient synagogue where Jesus reportedly preached. These religious and cultural contours which depicted the significance of that half-destroyed remote village, had registered with the Christians who lived there under Muslim rule; but it was not until the Crusader’s takeover that Nazareth began to gain stature in the Christian world.

Christian Nazareth

Nazareth would not become historically significant again until it was captured by Tancred, the ‘Prince of the Galilee’ and subordinated to the Crusader Kingdom of Jerusalem (founded in 1099 by Godfrey de Bouillon and his brother Baldwin). Already in 975, however, the Byzantine Empire had swept south into Syria and Palestine, taking advantage of the dwindling power of the Abbasid Dynasty in Baghdad and its rival Fatimids in Egypt. The Imperial armies took the Galilee and accepted the surrender of its towns – Tiberias and Nazareth. Thereafter, the Byzantine advance was checked by the Fatimids, and they sought to achieve the status of curators of the Christian holy places in the Holy Land and protectors of the Christians under the

latter's suzerainty; something they achieved in a series of treaties that were signed between these two regional powers.²⁰ This facilitated the pilgrimage of pious Christians to the holy places in the Holy Land – among them Nazareth – which permitted the believers to see with their own eyes, and touch with their own hands, the places which marked Jesus' life, in one continuum from Nazareth to Bethlehem, Jerusalem and Mount Tabor, Tiberias and Kafr Kanna. These places had been inhabited continuously by Christians in spite of the general Muslim rule which was at times menaced by the Byzantines. Sometimes these areas were in a no man's land between the Egyptian Fatimids and the Syrian local chieftains.²¹

After the conquest of Jerusalem in 1099, the Crusaders came to rule not only that holy city and adjoining Bethlehem, but also part of the coastal plain of Palestine; this enabled them to strengthen their fledgling state in the face of the general chaos which prevailed in the Islamic world at that time. Tancred's campaign to the north in 1099 won him Tiberias and Beit Shean, which became key Crusader forts in northern Palestine, and then he took over the important Christian sites of Mount Tabor and Nazareth. Tancred found an established Greek priesthood there, which he recognized, and he also confirmed its vast estates on both sides of the Jordan River which had remained under its control during Muslim rule. Tancred found Nazareth to be a small and half-destroyed village, but most of its remaining inhabitants were Christians. He helped them restore their two main churches. However, it was not until the twelfth century that the Crusaders rebuilt the large and magnificent Basilica of the Annunciation which became the cathedral of the Archbishop who transferred his seat from Beit Shean to the revived and restored Nazareth.²²

The Muslim counterattack led by Saladin was launched in 1187 and, after the Crusader defeat in Hittin near Tiberias, the Muslims rapidly conquered Tiberias and Acre. From there, five columns of fighters were despatched to reduce the rest of the Crusader domains in Palestine and western Syria. One of them was commanded by Saladin's nephew, Hussam a-Din 'Umar ibn Muhammad ibn Lajin. Under his command was Mudhaffar a-Din Kukbari who led his battalions into Nazareth. The local Christians ran for safety to the Church of the Annunciation, but the structure could not withstand the assault, and all those who sought refuge in it were massacred. From there the Muslims advanced towards the Valley of Jezreel and conquered it in a storm.²³ It is noteworthy that popular belief among the Muslims of Nazareth today attributes the conquest of their city at the hands of Saladin's forces to a certain Shihab a-Din, said to also be Saladin's nephew, something which further enhances – by virtue of the great reputation of that illustrious Muslim fighter who reclaimed Jerusalem from the Crusaders – the Muslim hold on Nazareth. Another version claims that Shihab a-Din was killed at the battle of Hittin and only transported to Nazareth for burial. Since the identity of the conqueror of Nazareth is known from Muslim sources²⁴ to be neither of Saladin's nephews, Shihab a-din or Hussam a-Din, one can only conclude that this was a myth cultivated over the years by Muslims of Nazareth. Besides, one wonders why the victorious Muslims of Hittin would bother in the scorching heat of July to transport the rapidly decomposing corpse of Shihab a-Din for burial to a place which not only had no special Islamic significance, but was quite far from the battlefield, and would still have been in enemy territory until conquered by Hussam.

There is another puzzle regarding the fate of the Christians of Nazareth who were totally massacred as related above. The same Hussam who was in charge of the column which conquered the Galilee and northern Samaria, spared the Christians of Nablus, and even allowed them to continue to use their lands and properties as long as they paid the *Jizya*, the poll tax imposed on *dhimmi*s (the protected non-Muslim people under Islamic rule).²⁵ According to

Praver, this was a policy devised by Saladin himself to differentiate between the Frankish Crusaders who came as invaders and had to be repulsed and exterminated, and the local Eastern Christians who had lived under the Muslim rule as *dhimmi*s before the Crusader venture.²⁶ Does this mean that Nazareth's Christians were considered as belonging to the Western Crusaders, in view of Tancred's personal involvement in the refurbishing of the Basilica of the Annunciation, rather than the offspring of the previous Eastern Christians who had populated that town before the Crusader inroad? It is hard to know. In any case, if other precedents within the Saladin realm were typical, other Christians were also treated harshly. According to a Muslim chronicler, Governor of Armenia, Taqi a-Din 'Umar, another nephew of Saladin, was: 'without mercy; he shed the blood of the oppressed Armenian peasants in the country of Jabal Jur.'²⁷ Elsewhere, Saladin is praised by another Muslim writer for censoring and demoting the *dhimmi*s.²⁸ It is perhaps this kind of attitude towards the subjugated *dhimmi*s which prompted the great historian of the Crusader period, J. Praver, to speak about the 'legend of Saladin's generosity and courtesy which found currency in both Christendom and Islamdom' and which stemmed from the *aman*²⁹ offers that he made to Eastern Christians when it suited his purposes.³⁰

New waves of Crusaders revived the Christian presence in the Holy Land, and we hear that Nazareth was restored to Christian rule, or at the very least was reopened to Christian pilgrimage, at the beginning of the thirteenth century and Nazareth became equal with Jerusalem and Bethlehem as a holy site. The later Crusades would also pay it equal attention. But the skirmishes between the Crusaders and Saladin's successors in Palestine continued, and, around 1220, these led to the destruction of the Christian part of Nazareth.³¹ In 1229, by virtue of the agreement reached at Tel-' Ajul-Jaffa between Emperor Frederick II and Sultan Al-Malik al-Kamil, which restored parts of Palestine to the Crusaders – including Jerusalem – the Crusaders also received under their jurisdiction the Acre-Nazareth road which formed a link between those two sites (once again Christian) via the important Templar fortress of Shefar'am. This agreement caused uproar in both the Islamic and Christian worlds,³² for none of them considered the outcome totally satisfactory, and each of them probably believed that they could extract more from the hated rival. Perhaps the clause introduced by the Muslims, which determined the validity of any agreements for ten years – the typical period of *hudna* (armistice) set up by Muslim jurists following the precedent of the Prophet, after which Jihad is resumed in earnest – went unnoticed at the time. For the Crusaders this period was a much-needed break to reorganize their forces and brace themselves for the forthcoming confrontations.

In 1244, Central Asian Muslim troops from Khawarizm roamed the Galilee, which gave the local Muslims, who lived under Christian overlords, the opportunity to shift their loyalty to their coreligionists. The Crusaders lost their hold on the countryside and were restricted to their fortresses. Those in Nazareth were comforted by the visit in 1251 of the French monarch Louis IX. That pious king, who came to rescue the Holy Land from the Muslims, saw it as his first duty to perform the pilgrimage to Nazareth. He set out from Acre, stayed overnight in Tsipori, and then to Kafr Kanna where Jesus had supposedly turned water into wine, climbed up Mount Tabor and then traveled all the way to Nazareth. The ascetic king alighted from his horse, and wearing a coarse robe on that chilly day in March, he approached Nazareth on foot, with excitement and sorrow. While in town, he only ate bread and drank water, and he spent an entire day of prayer at the Church of the Annunciation. He prayed in the subterranean hall which had survived the destruction by Saladin's troops, but he could not examine the architectural marvel of the gate of the church, which had been refurbished the previous century, complete with magnificent Romanesque capitals on its pillars. These ornaments had been buried in the ground during the

Muslim attacks and would not be unearthed until the twentieth century.³³

With the decline of the Crusader state in Palestine in the mid-thirteenth century – even before – many of the landed domains were taken over by martial Orders, such as the Templars and the Hospitallers, who manned the remaining military fortresses as the state power of the Crusaders dwindled. The Hospitallers acquired between the years 1255 and 1263 the entire domain of the Bishop of Nazareth, first as tenants and then as owners. In 1263, a mere 12 years after the comforting visit of St Louis, the Mamluk power bursting out of Egypt augured the end of the Crusaders in Palestine. One of the Mamluk commanders, ‘Ala’ a-Din Taibars, assaulted Hospitaller Nazareth and lay it to waste, notably what remained of the Church of the Annunciation, which was razed to the ground and levelled so as to eliminate any sign of its previous existence. That act of utter destruction was also symbolic, for it brought to its end the Crusader control of the Galilee and the Christian rule of Nazareth. Soon thereafter, Baibars and his troops would complete the total elimination of the Crusaders in Palestine and the entire destruction of their forts and towns. In 1272 we still hear of Christian pilgrims to Nazareth,³⁴ but, except for lamenting the Nazareth that was, it is doubtful whether there was any site left to visit or any shrine to pray in. The last mention of Nazareth in medieval history concerns the Mongol invasion of Syria and Palestine. The Muslims and the remnants of the Crusaders agreed (in 1283) to alert one another to the approaching invaders, and the Christians undertook to shelter Muslim refugee populations in case of actual Tartar attack. In return, the Muslims consented that the Nazareth Church (presumably the ruined Basilica of the Annunciation) and the adjacent four houses would be put at the disposal of the Crusaders and that they would be permitted to lead their services there.³⁵ One can only assume that some of the surviving Christians did succeed in finding their way to the ruins of Nazareth and in gathering together enough of them to restore some similitude of worship in and around the holy site.

After a silent chasm of almost four centuries, under the Mamluk and then the Ottoman Empires, history tells us that the local Emir, Fakhr a-Din, permitted the Franciscans in 1620 to restore the two churches of Nazareth.³⁶ This local chieftan, a Druze, ruled a vast area from Antioch in the north to, and including, Mount Carmel. During his rule (1585-1632) he maintained good commercial relations with the West through the intermediary of Italian merchants from Livorno; and he succeeded in harmonizing relations between the contending communities of Lebanon, notably by coopting the Maronites into his bureaucracy.³⁷ It is within this context of extraordinary generosity towards his Christian subjects that one has to understand the departure from the otherwise oppressive policies of the Ottomans towards their *dhimmi* population. In fact, Fakhr a-Din was defeated by the Turks and expelled from the region in 1635, and the Christians probably reverted to their submissive role in Nazareth and elsewhere in Palestine.

Judging by the documents we have from the end of the seventeenth century, the situation of the Christians (and Jews) under the rule of Istanbul in Palestine was not very enviable. A report from Ottoman Jerusalem in 1700 tells a very sorry story:

The Christians are also obliged to pay the poll tax [*Jizya*]. The Muslims, however, were not permitted to exact payment of the tax on the Sabbath or Holy Days, and consequently we could walk in the streets unmolested on those days. However, during the week, the paupers dared not show themselves outside. Likewise, the soldiers are not allowed to carry out their controls to collect the tax from door to door, and all the less so in prayer houses. But in their wickedness, the soldiers would go to the synagogue [and supposedly also to the church], requesting from the emerging congregants to show their certificates of payment. Moreover, the Muslim Law requires that each religious denomination wear its specific garment so that each people may be distinguished from another. This distinction also applies to footwear ... Indeed, the Jews wear shoes of a dark blue color, whereas Christians wear red shoes. No one can use green, for this color is worn solely by Muslims ... It is rare for the

Turkish or even the Arab notables to harm the Jews when passing them, but the common folk persecute the Jews. If an Arab strikes a Jew, the latter must appease him but must not rebuke him for fear that he may be struck even harder, which they [the Arabs] do without the slightest scruple ... Even the Christians are subjected to these vexations. If a Jew offends a Muslim, the latter strikes him a brutal blow with his shoe in order to demean him, without anyone being able to prevent him from doing so. The Christians fall victim to the same treatment and they suffer as much as the Jews, except that the former are very rich by reason of the subsidies they receive from abroad, and they use this money to bribe the Arabs.³⁸

At the beginning of the eighteenth century, another chieftain, Dahir al-'Umar, received the Galilee in tenancy from the Ottoman authorities; this included the cities of Nazareth, Tiberias and Safed and, from his regional capital, Tiberias, he sent his troops to extract taxes from his subjects. In his time, around 1730, the Basilica of the Annunciation was restored to its splendor. Dahir was known to have established economic contacts with Muslim and Christian pirates, something which might explain his generosity towards Nazareth, but his arrogance and independent policy aroused the ire of the Sultan in Istanbul against him, and the latter strove relentlessly for his demise until he was murdered in 1775. His successor, Ahmed al-Jazzar, apparently did not effect any noticeable changes in the status of Nazareth. When Napoleon launched his campaign in Palestine in 1799 and his armies reached the Galilee, the Christians were hoping for a revolution in their situation, but his control of the city did not last more than a few days. Napoleon failed to take Acre by assault, and his troops had to evacuate the country. But his precedent of a renewed Western interest in Palestine was firmly established.³⁹

The nineteenth century brought a major development inasmuch as Western influence in Palestine and the related involvement of the Powers in the affairs of the minorities, especially the Christians among them, produced a marked upgrading of their status. In 1800 the Christians numbered around 25,000, out of a total population of 300,000, and were concentrated mainly in Jerusalem, Bethlehem and Nazareth. Their main denominations were Graeco-Orthodox, Graeco-Catholic and Roman-Catholic. At the beginning of the century, the land was divided into two provinces: the Eastern mountainous part belonged to the province of Damascus, while the Galilee and the coastal plain belonged to Acre.⁴⁰ Under this administration both the Jews and the Christians were regarded by the authorities as belonging to their religious community (the Milet) whose designated heads dealt with the Ottoman bureaucracy in the name of their coreligionists. In 1864 the *Vilayet* reform divided Palestine into provinces (*Sanjaks*): the provinces of Nablus and Acre now belonged to the *Vilayet* of Beirut, and the Jerusalem *Sanjak* depended on the *Vilayet* of Damascus.

Western involvement in the Levant during the nineteenth century also brought about a heightened activity in European consulates and missionaries of all denominations who promoted educational and medical institutions that were to transform the population and help it to embark on the road to modernization. Western powers regarded the missions as their pioneers to advance and protect their interests in the Levant should the Ottoman Empire show signs of disintegration. In consequence, they demanded and obtained rights to sponsor the various denominations, the Christian holy sites, and the welfare of their clients. The inventions of the steamboat and the telegraph, and the improvement of roads in Palestine as the century drew to its end, also encouraged more pilgrims to the country and revived European interest in the Christian holy places, among them Nazareth. In 1885, there were 45,000 Christians in Palestine (out of a total of 450,000).⁴¹ That is, the proportion of Christians had increased to 10 percent, a slight improvement compared to the beginning of the century.

Consular reports from Palestine abound regarding the situation of the Christians in the Holy Land during the nineteenth century. Once again, although no specific references are made to

Nazareth, and it was often in a separate *Vilayet* from Jerusalem, which due to its status received most attention, it is still possible to infer the treatment of the Christian minorities in Nazareth from conditions in Jerusalem. On 8 November 1858, British Consul James Finn wrote to the Earl of Malmesbury:

In continuing to report concerning the apprehensions of Christians from the revival of fanaticism on the part of the Mahometans, I have the honour to state that daily accounts are given of insults in the streets offered to Christians and Jews, accompanied by acts of violence ... As far as I have learned, there is no case yet known of a Christian's evidence being placed on record ... Only a few days ago his Beatitude the Greek-Orthodox patriarch was returning through the streets from the Cadi's court of judgement... but had to pass through a gauntlet of curses hurled at his religion, his prayers, his fathers etc. ... This in Jerusalem where Christian Consuls have flags flying, including the Russian ... Can this state of things be expected to last long?⁴²

Closer to Nazareth, in the district of Nablus, the situation was no better. The same Consul reported on the same day to London that:

Whereas many villages in the district of Nablus have a few Christian families located in each, such families were subjected in every direction to plunder and insults at the approach of Tahir, the military Pasha, shortly before his arrival ... But the two villages of Zebabdeh and Likfair where all the inhabitants are Christians, and in the former of which there is a humble chapel, were utterly sacked, men and women stripped even of their shirts and turned adrift. This was done by the people of Tubas and Kabatieh, always a violent people, and no redress or punishment has yet been given by the military force ... But on the arrival of Tahir Pasha ... instead of encamping in tents in this beautiful season, the house of a Christian (Greek) priest was taken in his absence and his stores of grain and oil for the winter were taken, not to be consumed by the soldiers ... but were mixed into one heap, wheat, barley, lentils, and oil, by the Muslims of the city, and thrown into the street... In conclusion, I have the honour to quote the perpetual expression of the Christians in Palestine, that their lot is become far worse since the termination of the Russian war than it was before that period, extending back to 1831.⁴³

There is no reason to assume that the fate of Nazareth Christians was any better. Only the conquest of Nazareth by General Allenby's British troops at the end of the First World War, signaled not only that the Ottoman Empire had been defeated and obliterated, but also that Britain was going to rule Palestine as a Mandatary Power, entrusted to this task by the League of Nations. At the time of its occupation by the British, Nazareth had a population of 8,000, two-thirds of whom were Christians and the rest Muslims.⁴⁴ Under the relatively liberal regime of the British on the one hand, and the removal of the perennial threat of the surrounding Muslim populace on the other, Nazareth would know a new era of prosperity and security, unknown since the times of Tancred the Crusader.

Notes

1 Matthew 2:23, *The New English Bible* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1971). All biblical references henceforth will be from this English translation.

2 Lamentations 4:7.

3 Amos 2:11-12.

4 *Nazir* and *nezirut*, in *Encyclopedia Hebraica*, Vol. 25, pp. 25-31 [Hebrew].

5 See the Hartom-Kasuto interpretation of the Bible, in A. Hartom, *The Five Books*, Vol. 5, in D. Kasuto (ed.), *Interpretation of the Bible* (Tel Aviv: Tel Aviv University, 1956), p. 60. This commentary on the Bible runs to 14 volumes, each with separate titles. The Five Books' refers to those books which are not part of the Pentateuch or the Prophets, and constitutes one volume in itself.

6 Acts 24:5.

- 7 Numbers 6:2, 21.
- 8 Judges 13:16,17.
- 9 See *Natzranim*, in *Encyclopedia Hebraica*, Vol. 25, p. 355.
- 10 See 'Nazareth'; *Ibid.*, p. 357.
- 11 John 1:47.
- 12 In modern Arabic, however, the parallel usage of *Masihiya* for the faith and *Masihiyun* for its followers is still current, reflecting – perhaps – the terminology imposed by the Christian Arabs who wished to escape the derogatory meaning of *Notzrim* by deriving the name of their religion, like the rest of their coreligionists, from the Christ, the Anointed One, or *Mashih* in Arabic.
- 13 See *Encyclopedia Hebraica*.
- 14 *Ibid.*
- 15 *Ibid.*
- 16 See Matthew 21:11 and 27:71; Mark 1:9,24,10:47,14:67 and 16:6; Luke 18:37 and 24:19; John 1:45,18:5 and 19:19; and Acts 2:22, 3:6, 4:10, 6:14, 10:38, 22:8 and 26:9.
- 17 Luke 1:26-38.
- 18 *Ibid.*, 2:39.
- 19 *Ibid.*, 2:51.
- 20 For this passage and Nazareth under the Crusaders, see J. Praver, *A History of the Latin Kingdom in Jerusalem*, Vols 1 and 2 (Jerusalem: The Bailik Institute, 1963) [Hebrew].
- 21 *Ibid.*, Vol. 1, pp. 128-9.
- 22 See *Encyclopedia Hebraica*, Vol. 25, p. 357.
- 23 Praver, *Latin Kingdom in Jerusalem*, Vol. 1, p. 543.
- 24 The author of the books describing these battles is 'Imad a-Din. See Praver, *Latin Kingdom in Jerusalem*, Vol. 1, p. 543, footnote.
- 25 For a wide-ranging discussion of these terms, see Bat Ye'or, *The Dhimmi: Jews and Christians under Islam* (Madison, WI: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 1985); and *The Decline of Eastern Christianity under Islam: From Jihad to Dhimmitude* (Madison, WI: Fairleigh Dickinson Press, 1996).
- 26 See Praver, *Latin Kingdom in Jerusalem*, Vol. 1, pp. 545-6.
- 27 Cited by Bat Ye'or, *Decline of Eastern Christianity*, p. 118 (from Bar Hebraeus).
- 28 Cited by Bat Ye'or, *The Dhimmi*, p. 210.
- 29 *Aman* is a safeguard or guarantee given by the Muslim state to members of non-Islamic faiths who seek refuge in Islamic countries, either for safe passage, or to live there.
- 30 Praver, *Latin Kingdom in Jerusalem*, Vol. 1, pp. 541-2.
- 31 *Ibid.*, Vol. 2, p. 156.
- 32 *Ibid.*, pp. 187-8.
- 33 *Ibid.*, pp. 329-30. See also *Encyclopedia Hebraica*, Vol. 25, p. 357.
- 34 Praver, *Latin Kingdom in Jerusalem*, Vol. 2, p. 491.
- 35 *Ibid.*, p. 512.
- 36 *Encyclopedia Hebraica*, Vol. 25, p. 357.
- 37 *Ibid.*, Vol. 13, p. 97.
- 38 Report by the Jewish traveler, Gedaliah of Seimiatyc, reproduced in Bat Ye'or, *Decline of Eastern Christianity*, pp. 377-80.
- 39 *Encyclopedia Hebraica*, Vol. 25, p. 357; and Vol. 6, pp. 495-7.
- 40 *Ibid.*, Vol. 6, pp. 498-503.
- 41 *Ibid.*
- 42 Reproduced by Bat Ye'or, *Decline of Eastern Christianity*, pp. 397-8.
- 43 *Ibid.*, p. 399.
- 44 *Encyclopedia Hebraica*, Vol. 25, p. 357.

2.

Modern Nazareth

When British troops marched into Nazareth in 1918, they found a population of 8,000, two-thirds of which was Christian and the rest Muslim.¹ Both due to the preponderance of Christians and the rule of a Christian Mandatary Power, Great Britain – under whose control Nazareth was the administrative center for the Galilee – the city underwent extraordinary development, shown by the more than doubling of the town's population in the 30 years of the Mandate to about 18,000.² Under the Pax Britannica of those years, and independently of the much greater and more troublesome confrontation between Zionism and nascent Palestinian nationalism to which the British had to attend, Nazareth was mainly concerned with its holy places and the institutionalized coexistence between its various Christian denominations, as well as with the local Muslim minority

The Holy Places

M. Aviyonah, an eminent scholar of the history of Eretz Israel/Palestine, distinguished between three different definitions of what 'holy places' might mean, in a country which was first sanctified by the Jews as a 'holy land', then by the Christians because of the birth of Christianity there, and then by Islam.³ A holy place can be sanctified by one of those faiths, or by all three in succession or simultaneously, though the precise significance of sanctity may vary from one religion to the other.

The first category covers the legal methods used in the attempt to settle claims and counter-claims by various religious communities to the same site as 'theirs'. The first step was carried out in the *firman*⁴ of 1757 where the Ottoman Sultan established the respective rights of the contending Christian denominations to their main holy sites in Jerusalem and Bethlehem. The regulations based on this Imperial Edict have constituted ever since the famous *status quo* to which all have to conform – and which covers the rituals, maintenance of the places etc. – and the minutest deviation from them caused emotional strain and sometimes even violent rifts. The British Mandate strictly enforced these regulations, bound as it was by international law which stipulated continuity of the existing legal system.

There is, however, the philosophical question of whether a secular law, whatever its origin, can govern an essentially religious matter. On the one hand, where issues of faith are concerned, which are by definition exclusive, absolute and uncompromizing by reason of their divine origin, what kind of secular law can displace them or modify them? On the other hand, if the ruling government wishes to maintain public order, it certainly cannot allow communal bickerings to

erupt into violent riots when disagreement and the inability to compromise prevail. For example, the Tomb of the Patriarchs in Hebron was held out of bounds for Jews through all the centuries of Muslim rule, especially after it became a mosque (al-Masjad al-Ibrahimi). However, when it was taken over by Israel in 1967, it became in practice a shared shrine between Jews and Muslims, much to the chagrin of the latter, who cannot accept the right of an occupying power to determine what is holy to them, nor acquiesce in the ‘invasion’ of their mosque by ‘Unbelievers’ who used to be excluded. The fact that the place might be holy to others too, and that short of a practical accommodation between the contending parties no one would be able to worship, does not mitigate one iota of Muslim anger and frustration at the ‘usurpation’ or ‘their’ shrine. As a noted Israeli jurist, Itzhak Englard, has put it:

Conceptually, an individual may well forgo any of his personal interests, such as his right to property. But he cannot waive anything on behalf of his God. No utilitarian moral consideration can be of binding effect when one party regards himself constrained by heavenly precept. In the dispute over holy places, it happens that the principle litigant – God as it were – is absent. His representatives on earth are not at liberty to yield anything on His behalf. From this perspective, no compromise or sharing of a holy place can be envisaged. Holy places in general are characterized by a certain polarity: prohibition of access [to others, as one party feels], and duty of access [to one’s own party].⁵

The British were so determined not to disrupt the *status quo* that they maintained it even when it was discriminatory in essence; for example, the limitations placed on the right of Jews to have access to the Western Wall, which were enforced under Muslim rule, continued to be enforced under the British. Thus, the maintenance of the *status quo* for the sake of public order is contradicted by the right to freedom of worship, and does not accord with the principle of equal community access to holy places that are shared by more than one faith. Moreover, due to British reluctance, indeed incapacity, to settle these contradictions in courts of law, they issued an Order in Council in 1924 that denied court jurisdiction in the matter of disputes concerning holy places. The rationale was, that since it was difficult to settle by formal legal tools and techniques the problems at hand, it was advisable to transfer the power of decision from the judicial to the political sphere.⁶ This decision played a very important role in the Muslim-Christian controversy in Nazareth, which lies at the core of this study.

The second category in Aviyonah’s breakdown of holy places covers sites or buildings that are connected to a historical or legendary event of religious significance. In this category he puts the Temple Mount in Jerusalem, the Tombs of the Patriarchs in Hebron, and also the churches of Nazareth and the other Christian sites around Lake Tiberias.

The third category includes popular sites such as tombs of saints – biblical or more recent – or of martyrs of famous battles, which became places of prayer (*Musalla* in Arabic) or of mass pilgrimage. Many of these saints are said to be buried in several places at the same time, or sanctified by more than one faith simultaneously, in spite of the seeming contradictions of these situations.⁷

To these universal modes of ‘formal’ sanctity, one has to add the notion of *Waqf*, usually translated into ‘holy endowment’, which is quite peculiar to Islam, and will be central in our story of Nazareth. There are holy endowments in other faiths too,⁸ but they have not acquired in modern times any degree of sanctity warranting their classification as holy sites. Etymologically, the word derives from *waqafa* – to stop, pause, block, suspend or come to a standstill. By extension it also means inalienable property, or property restricted to a certain use. Historically, when the Abbasid Dynasty (750-1258) expropriated private property for the use of the public treasury, many found refuge in the *Waqf* to escape that fate and keep their belongings within

their families or to dedicate their proceeds to some charitable purpose.⁹ In the modern world the amount of accumulated endowed properties has risen to become such a high proportion of the nation's real estate that it has caused serious economic disruptions as these properties are exempted from taxes and government seizure; this necessitated public administration of those assets by a Ministry of *Awqaf*.¹⁰

Awqaf are of many kinds. One type is *ahli* or *dhurriya*, that is a private or family trust, whose proceeds go to family members of the donor; and after the death of the last descendant, to a charitable purpose. Another is a *waqfkhayri* or *'am*, that is a public trust dedicated to public charity or a religious purpose. The *Waqf* has a curator, or trustee, the *nazir*, who supervises the mortmain,¹¹ and any disputes about the property or its management are, according to Islamic law, the sole domain of Shari'a¹² courts. Under the Ottoman regime restrictions – which also applied to Palestine – were imposed on *Waqf*. These were based on the Ottoman system of land-ownership. Basically, all lands, according to this policy, were owned by the state and their usufruct went to the Empire's Treasury (*Miri* lands). But, in the course of time, the state granted land to individuals in reward for their services or distinction, and these became entirely private property (*Mulk*). Endowments could be made only from lands that were owned privately, not from those belonging to the state, even when they were held by tenants. In practice, however, a new category of quasi-*Waqf* was created over the years, which permitted income to be dedicated to charitable purposes from state-owned lands.¹³

The League of Nations directed the Mandatary Powers, including Great Britain in Palestine, to continue to administer the *Awqaf* according to Muslim Shari'a laws,¹⁴ and the Mandatary Government transferred all the income from *Waqf* assets to the Supreme Muslim Council, which distributed the revenue in accordance with the donator's will.¹⁵ Despite the fact that reforms in many Islamic countries since the nineteenth century had subjected *Waqf* matters to the civil code without any regard for the traditional Islamic control procedures – often against the virulent opposition of clerics who were reluctant to be despoiled of a source of their power and influence – the British authorities in Palestine determined to refrain from interfering in Islamic matters and left the *Waqf* issue to the Supreme Muslim Council headed by the Mufti of Jerusalem, Haj Amin al-Husseini, who was to play a dominant role in local, national and religious affairs until the end of the Mandate.

The *Awqaf* from the entirely privately-owned lands (*Mulk*), are considered 'Allah's property'; they are perpetual in import and cannot be sold or exchanged (unless with assets whose income is higher, or for something that would be in line with the donator's intent). These laws were also applied in Ottoman Palestine to *Awqaf* that were dedicated by non-Muslims to the benefit of Muslim individuals or institutions. That meant that a non-Muslim donator had to appear before the Shari'a court and validate his donation there before it could be counted as *Waqf* and after that act of endowment it remained the exclusive domain of the Muslim religious court to adjudicate. However, under the British Mandate, the Jewish and Christian communities were also allowed to endow their own *Awqaf* and have them adjudged by their own respective religious courts. In all cases, all claims relating to *Waqf* affairs became legally obsolescent following periods of 7-36 years, depending on the case. Under the Mandate, the British High Commissioner also had the authority to turn *Miri* into *Mulk* land, hence making the property susceptible to *Waqf* laws.¹⁶

Waqf land also has wider political ramifications inasmuch as some Islamic fundamentalist movements, and some scholars of the Holy Law of Islam – based upon radical interpretation of

Islamic history – have interpreted all lands conquered by Islam since its inception as *Waqf* which cannot be waived by Muslims under any circumstances. In the words of relatively moderate Sheikh Nimr Darwish, the founder of the Muslim Movement in Israel:

All Palestine is *Waqf*; any nation, any individual, any society which consents to sell their *Waqf* are doomed to be ravaged by fire ... Even should men ignore [that transgression], Allah will not.¹⁷

The respected Sheikh was only faintly echoing the much blunter statements of the Hamas Charter that was presumably worded by another venerated scholar – Sheikh Ahmed Yassin of Gaza:

The Islamic Resistance Movement believes that the land of Palestine has been an Islamic *Waqf* throughout the generations, and until the Day of Resurrection no one can renounce it or part of it. No Arab country nor the aggregate of all Arab countries, and no Arab king or president, nor all of them in the aggregate, have that right, or has any organization that right or the aggregate of all organizations, be they Palestinian or Arab, because Palestine is an Islamic *Waqf* throughout all generations and until the Day of Resurrection. Who can presume to speak for all Islamic generations to the Day of Resurrection? This is the status [of the land] in the Islamic Shari'a, and it is similar to all lands conquered by Islam by force, and made therefore *Waqf* lands upon their conquest, for all generations of Muslims until the Day of Resurrection. This [norm] has prevailed since the commanders of the Muslim armies completed the conquest of Syria and Iraq, and they asked the Caliph of Muslims, 'Umar ibn-al-Khattab, for his view on the conquered land, whether it should be partitioned between the troops or be left in the possession of its population, or otherwise. Following discussions and consultations between the Caliph of Islam ... and the Companions of the Messenger of Allah ... they decided that the land should remain in the hands of its owners to benefit from it and its wealth; but the control (*raqba*)¹⁸ of the land and the land itself ought to be endowed [in perpetuity] as a *Waqf* for all generations of Muslims until the Day of Resurrection. The ownership of the land by its [previous] owners is one of usufruct, and this *Waqf* will endure as long as heaven and earth last. Any demarche in violation of this law of Islam, with regard to Palestine is baseless and reflects on its perpetrators.¹⁹

This kind of political interpretation of the Shari'a, based on Islamic sources to be sure, but inapplicable in the modern world, raises the spectre of open-ended territorial demands with regard to any land that was at one time or another under Islamic rule (*Dar-al-Islam*) – such as Spain, Portugal, Southern France, Israel, India, etc. – with the implied threat of violence, by way of Jihad, if the rulers or the inhabitants of those lands refused to be 'retrieved' by their former Islamic masters. In the case of Israel, this threat has already been outlined in the Hamas Charter,²⁰ and it is not unusual to hear Muslim fundamentalists talk with nostalgia about erstwhile Islamic Andalusia.

Other issues regarding 'holy places' are houses of prayer, which do not come under the above category, or cemeteries or other sites that are declared 'holy' from time to time to fulfill some political or personal ambition. For example, Muslim fundamentalists in Israel today, led by the charismatic Sheikh Ra'id, the Mayor of Umm al-Fahm, have been reclaiming old – often destroyed – Muslim mosques or cemeteries and declaring them 'holy places' though there is nothing specifically holy about them. They revive them, restore them, put them back into operation, and demand that the proceeds they draw from them go to the *Waqf* committees in Israel. This interchangeability between *Waqf* and holy place, that is what is *Waqf* is holy, and what is holy, or declared holy, is or ought to be *Waqf*, is the stuff that has been woven together into a powerful fabric of faith, passion and violence in today's Muslim-Christian controversy in Nazareth.

Christian Denominations

While at the beginning of the British Mandate the population of Nazareth was around 8,000, most of them Christian, at the end of that period (in 1948) that figure had more than doubled to 18,000,²¹ a measure of the prosperity and rapid development which the city had known during the 30-year Mandatary Rule. However, this city was a microcosm of the multiplicity of Christian denominations occasioned by the many historical and theological schisms within that tiny community of some 100,000²² in Palestine at the end of the Mandate. Nearly 10 percent of these Christians lived in Nazareth: 85 percent of those Christians, split between 24 different denominations, lived in northern Palestine, 60 percent of them in urban centers, mainly Nazareth and Haifa, and the rest in Christian and mixed villages throughout the Galilee.²³

By far the largest among them was the Greek-Orthodox community, headed by a Patriarch based in Jerusalem, and represented in Nazareth by a Metropolitane. They regard themselves as the descendants of Jacob (Jesus' brother) and for many years kept a monopoly of ethnic Greek dominance of the Church, though the rank and file were local Arabs. But, as recently as 1923, a church conference was held at which the composition of the leadership was challenged; the Arab majority of its followers demanded that the leadership be elected locally and not appointed from the outside, and that the Greek monopoly of the leadership be ended. But, even though a commission of enquiry was appointed by the High Commissioner in 1925 to sort out these demands, and these grievances were found to be justified, the Mandatary Power did not dare to change the famous *status quo*, and left things as they were. The problems remained unresolved until the end of the Mandate, although the followers of the church decided to boycott their unpopular leadership when they began to question the appointment of Greek clergymen over an Arab population.²⁴

Organizationally and emotionally, the Greek Orthodox Church was patronized by the Orthodox Church in Russia, which regarded Moscow as the 'Third Rome'. In the nineteenth century, the Russian Orthodox Church had bought large tracts of land in Palestine and built churches, monasteries, schools and hostels for Russian pilgrims. The priesthood which manned and operated many of these institutions were trained in Russia, although the church also maintained a close relationship with Greece. With the rise of Palestinian nationalism in the 1920s, which – under the leadership of Haj Amin al-Husseini – forbade the sale of land to Jews emigrating to Palestine, the Greek Patriarchate was accused by local Arabs, including members of the church, of selling some of its properties to the Zionists. This increased the sharp criticism against it.²⁵ But the Patriarchate pursued its single-minded policies, and came to control 14 major churches in the country, apart from those directly under the Patriarch's jurisdiction in East Jerusalem.²⁶ Post-Revolutionary Russia was less interested in religious affairs, but the Soviets never gave up their foothold in Palestine and they continued to maintain their religious establishments and to send delegations to gather firsthand information.²⁷

The second largest Christian community in Palestine was the Greek-Catholic community, which at the end of the British Mandate was headed by George Hakim, the Archbishop of Acre, Nazareth, Haifa and the Galilee. As an ethnic Arab he supported the Palestinian struggle against the British and the Jews, and was very active on the international political scene, including the Vatican, mobilizing world opinion in favor of the Palestinians. When he appeared before the Anglo-American Commission of Inquiry in 1946, he unequivocally and enthusiastically pretended to represent the Christians of Palestine who acted in tandem with their Muslim compatriots for the sake of an independent Arab Palestine. He helped found the 'Christian Association' under whose wings he hoped to rally all the Christians of Palestine to the Arab

cause.²⁸

The Catholics were headed by the Latin Patriarch of Jerusalem, and their roots go back to the time of the Crusader. They controlled several congregations in Nazareth, Haifa, Acre, Kafr Kanna and other townships and villages, and also operated a network of schools, hospitals and other institutions manned by monks and nuns, some of whose orders had been implanted in the Holy Land in Crusader times: Franciscans, Benedictines, Dominicans, Carmelites, Jesuits, Lazarites, and others. Most of the holy places and churches are operated by the Franciscans.²⁹ When Jerusalem was conquered by Saladin (see [Chapter 1](#)), the Patriarchate moved from Jerusalem to Acre; but when the latter also fell to the Muslims in 1291, the Patriarchate was abolished, and church affairs and interests in Palestine were taken care of by the Franciscan monks. It was not until the growing interference of the Western powers in Palestine at the end of the Ottoman rule, that the Patriarchate was revived in 1847.³⁰

During the Mandate years, the Latins were the second largest community, and during the 1940s the church comprised some 20,000 members, half of whom were in Jerusalem. They had a foothold in the Holy Sepulcher in Jerusalem and the Church of Nativity in Bethlehem, and they enjoyed, in consequence, support from Catholics in Europe (notably France and Italy). Being affiliated with the Catholic Church, they concentrated their attention during the Mandate on their relations with the Vatican rather than participating in the Palestinian national movement as did the Orthodox and the Greek-Catholics, who wanted to prove that they were no less Arab than their compatriots. The Jerusalem Latin Patriarchate also included Cyprus and Transjordan, and its head was appointed by Rome.³¹

The Maronites, who numbered no more than 6,000 souls at the end of the Mandate, had a long history of *rapprochement* with Rome, dating back to the Crusades and culminating in their formal affiliation in 1736. In the remote past, they had had a foothold in the Christian holy places in Palestine, but during the Crusades they renounced their 'right' in favor of the Latins. They originated from Lebanon but also established themselves in Haifa (about half of them), and in Nazareth, Jaffa, Acre and some villages in the Galilee. They were under the jurisdiction of the Archbishop of Tyre, but in Palestine they were represented by their Jaffa leadership. Due to their independent stand in Lebanon, and the support they enjoy from their diasporas across the world, they could afford to resist the Arab nationalist movement, and at times they even showed sympathy to the Jews and the Zionist movement in Palestine.³²

Other denominations were smaller: the Armenians were mainly concentrated in Jerusalem, Jaffa and Haifa; but there were Copts in Nazareth, and also Anglicans and Scots who operated schools, churches and medical centers in this city as well in their other centers in Palestine. The Protestant Churches were late-comers to Palestine and did not enjoy any rights in the holy places, which were reserved to the older established Churches (Eastern and Western); nor did they enjoy the legal status of 'Milets' which was accorded to the other denominations by the Ottomans for matters of jurisdiction. The British, who were reluctant to alter the *status quo*, did not include the Protestant denominations in their Order in Council of 1926 which regularized the condition of the other Churches. The Lutherans were also active in Palestine until the Second World War, which forced them to retreat back to Germany. The Southern Baptist Church, though very small, also had operations in Nazareth, namely a church and a school.³³

Thus, Nazareth during the British Mandate was a thriving center of Christian activity, mainly religious but also charitable, social, cultural and political. Competition was harsh between the various churches for the souls of a very limited and dwindling constituency. It is possible that this situation contributed to the Palestinian nationalistic trends, as some of the institutions tried to

attract their largely Arab audiences by catering to their nascent national sentiments. But there was quite another explanation to this phenomenon, which would come to full bloom under the state of Israel after 1948: church leaders were always susceptible to the accusation by Arab nationalists, whose ideology was often heavily imbued with Islam, of luring away Christian Arabs from the nationalist struggle; they therefore felt compelled to toe the Arab line, and sometimes had to prove that they were no less Arab than other Arabs.

Notes

- 1 'Nazareth', in *Encyclopedia Hebraica*, Vol. 25, p. 357.
- 2 Data from various sources compiled by Dan Rabinowitz, *Overlooking Nazareth* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), p. 25.
- 3 'The Holy Places and Historical Sites in Erez Israel/Palestine', *Encyclopedia Hebraica*, Vol. 25, pp. 1143-57.
- 4 A *firman* was an edict issued by, or in the name of, the Ottoman Sultan.
- 5 Itzhak Englard, 'The Legal Status of the Holy Places', in Ora Ahimeir (ed.), *Jerusalem: Aspects of Law* (Jerusalem: The Jerusalem Institute for Israeli Studies, 1983), pp. 4-7.
- 6 *Ibid.*, p. 5. See also Shmuel Berkowitz, 'Proposals for the Political Status of the Holy Places within the Context of a Peace Treaty', in Ahimeir, *Aspects of Law*, pp. 8-12.
- 7 'Aviyonah', see *Encyclopedia Hebraica*, Vol. 25, pp. 114-15.
- 8 In Second Temple Judaism, the holy endowments were linked to the Temple and therefore they ceased to exist after its destruction. However, such endowments for charitable purposes still exist, although without acquiring any degree of 'sanctity'. See 'Hekdesh', *Encyclopedia Hebraica*, Vol. 15, pp. 142-7.
- 9 See Bruce Lawrence, 'Waqf', in Keith Crim (ed.), *Abingdon Dictionary of Living Religions* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1981), p. 803; 'Waqf' in Cyril Glassé (ed.), *The Concise Encyclopedia of Islam* (New York: Harper & Row, 1989), p. 417; and 'Waqf' in Abraham Sela (ed.), *Political Encyclopedia of the Middle East* (Jerusalem: Jerusalem Publishing House, 1999), pp. 781-2.
- 10 See Marshall Hodgson, *The Venture of Islam*, Vol. 2 (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1974), pp. 124-5.
- 11 Mortmain refers to lands or tenements held inalienably by an ecclesiastical or other corporation.
- 12 Shari'a is the religious law of Islam.
- 13 See Sela, *Political Encyclopedia*; and *Encyclopedia Hebraica*.
- 14 Sela, *Political Encyclopedia*, p. 781. The following passage is partly based on this source.
- 15 *Encyclopedia Hebraica*, Vol. 15, p. 146.
- 16 *Ibid.*, p. 147.
- 17 The Sheikh made this statement during a public debate at Haifa University. Reported by the daily *Ha'aretz*, 28 December (1989).
- 18 'Raqba' was also the term used by the Ottomans with the meaning of legal ownership by the state of the lands of the Empire.
- 19 Article XI of the Hannas Charter, translated by Raphael Israeli, 'The Charter of Allah: The Platform of the Islamic Resistance Movement', in Yona Alexander *et al.* (eds), *The 1988-89 Annual on Terrorism* (Amsterdam: Kluwer Publishers, 1990), pp. 113-14.
- 20 See Articles XIV-XVI.
- 21 See Rabinowitz, *Overlooking Nazareth*, p. 25.
- 22 See Ori Stendel, *The Arabs in Israel: Between Hammer and Anvil* (Jerusalem: Academ, 1992), p. 96.
- 23 Exact statistics are hard to come by, therefore many are extrapolated and approximated. See *Encyclopedia Hebraica*, Vol. 25, p. 333.
- 24 See Stendel, *Arabs in Israel*, pp. 110-11.
- 25 *Ibid.*
- 26 *Encyclopedia Hebraica*, Vol. 25, p. 333.

27 Stendel, *Arabs in Israel*, p. 111.

28 *Ibid.*, pp. 106-7.

29 *Encyclopedia Hebraica*, Vol. 25, p. 333.

30 Stendel, *Arabs in Israel*, pp. 113-14.

31 *Ibid.*, p. 114.

32 *Ibid.*, p. 115. See also *Encyclopedia Hebraica*, Vol. 25, p. 333.

33 *Encyclopedia Hebraica*, Vol. 25, p. 333.

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Nazareth in Israel

Just as it had served in Crusader times as the seat of the Arch-bishopric of the Galilee, so Nazareth was recognized as a city at the end of the Ottoman period; and in the First World War it was selected as the headquarters of the Turkish and German forces when they planned the fateful Battle of Meggido, and they paved roads all around the city to move their troops to the front. This made Nazareth an important crossroads in northern Palestine. When the British occupied it, their Galilee district offices as well as their military barracks and police stations were also placed there. During Israel's 1948 War of Independence, the Kaukji Arab Liberation Army that invaded from Syria to succor the Palestinians, also chose to locate itself in Nazareth. It was from here that Arab operations were directed at the nearby Kibbutz Mishmar Ha'emek, which occasioned the massive migration of Palestinian refugees to Nazareth and dramatically increased its population and changed the demographic balance between Christians and Muslims.

Operation Dekel, which was launched by the newly established Israeli Armed Forces in July 1948, repulsed the Kaukji whose troops were hiding in caves and basements throughout town, and brought the entire Lower Galilee under Israeli rule. The then Prime Minister of the Israeli Provisional Government issued a directive to set up a special administrative task force to govern the city, to avoid friction with its inhabitants and to refrain from any act of desecration of the holy places. He also authorized the military to open fire on any soldier caught looting in the city. The entire population was put under military government, as was the rest of the Arab population throughout the country. The military rule, which until 1963 hampered the freedom of movement of the inhabitants and imposed security limitations on them, was indicative of the widespread suspicion that the Israeli authorities entertained *vis-à-vis* the large blocs of Arab population in Israel in general, and the largest concentration, which was in Nazareth, in particular. As an Israeli government official publication acknowledges, the development of Upper Nazareth on the ridge over historical Nazareth since the end of the 1950s, has:

... become a symbol of the rift between the Arab population in the Galilee and the government of Israel. Upper Nazareth received funding and the preferred status of a development town. Housing projects were given a strong push forward, and industrial zones were allocated. Although Jewish immigration to Israel waned in the 1960s and the 1970s, housing construction in Upper Galilee continued to gobble up land. While hundreds of apartments stood empty in Upper Nazareth, the National Planning Commission refused to approve a new master plan for Nazareth that would replace the one from 1942, largely due to objections raised by Upper Nazareth. The population of Nazareth had grown from 20,000 to 60,000 over the 40 years since the plan was drawn up, and haphazard construction covered every available space. In the center of the city, a ramshackle collection of car repair establishments, small garages and workshops created an eyesore directly across from the Church of Annunciation.¹

Demographic Balance

The establishment of Israel in 1948 dramatically changed Nazareth, just as it transformed the life of the entire Arab community of the country. According to demographic tables, the population of Nazareth almost doubled between 1948 and 1949, the year of the war for Israel's independence that had occasioned a massive exodus of most of the Arab population from the territory of former Palestine which had become Israel. Thus, the population increased from 18,000 at the end of the British Mandate, to 30,000 registered in post-war Nazareth;² most of the increase was due to the influx of Arab refugees evacuated from surrounding villages in the course of the war.³ Though it is difficult to gauge the denominational affiliation of the refugees, it is agreed that since most of them were Muslims, the demographic balance began to tilt towards the Muslims from that point.⁴ There is disagreement, however, as to the pace of this shift: while one writer tells us that in 1970 there were 35,000 inhabitants in the city, 60 percent of whom were Muslim,⁵ another states that 'by the late 1980s the Muslim community made up approximately 55 percent of the town's population.'⁶ The former seems more credible as it makes it easier to account for the figure at the end of the 1990s of a total population of 60,000, 70 percent of whom were Muslim.⁷

Be that as it may, it is clear that since the nineteenth century when the city took center stage (together with Jerusalem and Bethlehem), in the interest of the Western Powers it both grew rapidly and became a predominantly Christian city. In consequence, it changed from a sleepy backwater village of over 1,000, mostly Muslim, people who held the Christian *dhimmi*s in check and in contempt in the beginning of the 1800s, into a lively and thriving community of 8,000, in which the Christians already constituted a majority of close to 70 percent, when the British arrived a century later. But that demographic balance was to be gradually reversed from the early 1950s, until in the 1990s the exact opposite proportion was attained: 70 percent Muslims and 30 percent Christian, as explained above.

These figures cannot be seen by and in themselves, because the fate of the changing configurations of the population of Nazareth has to be seen in the context of what happened throughout the country during the 1948 war. One set of data says that about 90 percent of the Arabs who left Israel in that period were Muslim, and the rest Christian (perhaps 60,000 out of 600,000).⁸ Another claims that although the number of Christians who left the country in 1948 was far lower than their Muslim compatriots, their proportion in the general Arab population doubled from 10 percent at the end of the Mandate in 1948 to 20 percent at the end of the war⁹ a year later. The latter figure tends to be corroborated by the first State of Israel census in 1949 which found out that the Arab population living in Israel amounted to 160,000, which increased to 247,000 in 1961;¹⁰ hence, the figure of 50,000 quoted by Rabinowitz for the Christian population in Israel in the year of 1961, exactly corresponds to the 20 percent proportion mentioned above. In spite of this, the Christians' majority in Nazareth was seriously eroded around those years by the heavy influx of Muslim refugees, and their dominance was to be reversed sometime in the 1950s.

The proportion of Christians in the general Arab population kept dwindling all through Israel over the years, until it went down to 12 percent in the 1990s, although in absolute figures the population has grown by more than twofold during the 50-year existence of Israel, and attained the level of more than 110,000. This brought it back to the figure of the late 1940s when the Mandate was drawing to its end. This means simply that the Muslim population grew much faster, both by reason of higher birth-rates and due to the annexation of East Jerusalem, which was mostly inhabited by Palestinian Arabs in the aftermath of the 1967 war. Conversely, the percentage of Christians in the general Arab population of Israel continued to decline due to their

relatively low birth-rate, their lower fertility in general due to late marriages and the number of those registered as clergymen, and their relatively high rate of emigration which is not typical of the Muslims.¹¹

Urban Setting and Regional Impact

The dramatic growth of the city after the establishment of Israel in 1948 and the changes in its demographic balance have been reflected no less in its physical landscape than in its human one. For, in addition to the large churches that had for generations been the landmarks of the city, many new mosques have been erected to respond to the needs of the growing new Muslim majority. However, their dissemination throughout the Muslim areas was far from compensating for the splendor of the Annunciation Church which continued to stand as the major religious site and to attract pilgrims, local and foreign. In other words, the shifts in the communal composition of the population had increased, not diminished, the already existing disparities, perceived or real, between the Muslims and the Christians: the old, established, landed families of intellectuals and merchants claiming their Christian origins, sometimes going back to the Crusaders; while the Muslims, the newcomers, the less fortunate, looked with envy, anger, and sometimes with haughtiness, on the descendants of the despised Crusaders who were faring much better than they – the successors of the legendary Saladin. And while the Christians could see and show the evidence for their ancestry in the splendid churches and institutions they had inherited, the Muslims could only modestly point to the crumbling structure of the Shihab a-Din Tomb – where the alleged nephew of Saladin had been buried, under the giant shadow of the Annunciation Church – as the only vestige of a bygone age of grandeur.

It is not surprising, then, that communal strife and competition, usually hidden under slogans of ‘unity’, ‘solidarity’ and ‘fraternity’ in the face of the common enemy – Israel and Zionism – kept brewing. On Christmas Day, or during Christian festivals, the churches were spruced up and their bells were tolled; the city took on a festive allure and was flooded by visitors from the surrounding countryside or by foreign pilgrims; the whole ambiance was of a Christian city celebrating. To the Muslims these signs of prosperity and renown were merely tolerated at best, and often resented at worse. But, unlike in Ottoman times, when they could express their anger and frustration by booing or threatening, they were now constrained by the legal strictures imposed by a state of law. Conversely, of course, during Muslim festivals, notably the month of Ramadan when the streets abounded with Muslim shoppers, or when the calls of the Mu’azzin to the daily prayers mixed with the church bells, Christians were not entirely elated to see their preponderance eclipsed and their city Islamized, even for a while.

Both populations, however, had to share the cramped neighborhoods that their constricted city offered to them: the old center is that of the village that Nazareth had been over the centuries, with its narrow alleys and densely clustered houses surrounded on the slopes of the hills which enclose the city, by the newer neighborhoods going out to Upper Nazareth, the Jewish city that has been constructed since 1957 to serve as a balance to the otherwise predominant Arab population in Lower Galilee. Although only eight percent of the lands assigned to Upper Nazareth originally belonged to historical Nazareth under the British Mandate (1,200 out of a total of 15,000 dunam, or 300 out of 3,750 acres respectively), still the natural area of development of the old city was now taken from its jurisdiction, and its future expansion was

crippled.¹² All in all, the new Upper Nazareth ended up with a larger area under its jurisdiction (15,000 dunam) than historical Nazareth (only 12,500 dunam).¹³

As one walks through downtown Nazareth, one cannot avoid going by the Church of Annunciation and hearing the ancient Christian legend that when Saladin seized the city in 1193 from Crusader hands the Muslim victors wanted to turn the church into a mosque, as was their wont throughout their occupied territories; but angels appeared, who transported the structure away to Italy, in order to prevent that sacrilege. The Basilica, considered to be the largest in the Middle East, has been renovated many times throughout its history, but the latest version of the modern structure was consecrated in 1969 and consists of two levels: the lower church contains the grotto, which was – according to tradition – the home of Mary and the site of the Annunciation, and also remnants of the old structures from the Byzantine and Crusader eras which were at the heart of the ancient township of Nazareth. The museum within the church preserves the finds from the repeated excavations over the generations. The upper level is a Roman Catholic parish church, crowned by the dome which filters the natural light that illuminates the entire interior. The vast interior is decorated by mosaics and ceramic reliefs contributed by Christian communities the world over. The courtyard of the Basilica connects with St Joseph's Carpentry via the vast Franciscan Monastery. The Carpentry, where Jesus is said to have worked in his youth, is a church; and underneath it there are vestiges of an ancient church. In the marketplace one encounters the site of the ancient synagogue, with Jewish symbols and inscriptions indicating the house of Jewish worship where Jesus is said to have preached and which is mentioned in Luke.¹⁴

Further north is the seventeenth-century Church of St Gabriel, built over the traditional location of Mary's Well. This is thought to be the well from which Mary would have drawn water, and the Greek Orthodox Church believes this to be the site of the Annunciation by the angel Gabriel. The church is richly decorated by frescoes and illuminated by gilt chandeliers. The cross-shaped Anglican Church is further to the west, it was completed in 1871 and dedicated by the future King Edward VII. At the western end of the Old City lay the Maronite, or St Anthony's Church, completed in 1774 next to the Mensa Christi (Jesus' Table). And so on and so forth, some 30 important Christian sites: churches, monasteries, orphanages and schools belonging to all denominations. Even the tiny Coptic congregation has its own church, and so do the Baptists, the followers of the Salesian Church of Jesus as a Youth, and of Notre Dame de l'Effroi (Chapel of Fright).

The growing Muslim population, and to some extent the process of the Islamization of the city, have also required the building of more mosques recently. The White Mosque (al-abyad), built around the turn of the nineteenth century at the edge of the market, and which was for a long time the only Muslim house of prayer in town, has remained the most important Muslim site to date, until the revival of the Shihab a-Din controversy in the late 1990s turned that neglected tomb into a Muslim center-piece. In the 1960s the impressive modern Peace Mosque (Al-Salaam), was inaugurated, adding vast and comfortable accommodation for the soaring numbers of worshipping believers. The Nabi Sa'in Minaret, located on the highest spot of Nazareth, is also worth mentioning with its spiraling 177 steps up, which offer a dizzying view of the Old City. However, the rarity and lack of prominence of the few Muslim sites in town, compared with the predominance and ubiquitousness of the Christian sites, which also attract world attention and vast numbers of pilgrims from around the globe, have nurtured latent jealousies and open bickering between the two communities over the centuries. When Muslim awareness was aroused during the past two decades, as the fraternal link which bound together

Christians and Muslims under the secular, Arab-nationalistic, Communist Party umbrella was dissolved, the hidden backbiting erupted into open controversy.

The congestion in the narrow streets and alleys of the Old City is also due to the huge numbers of tourists and pilgrims who flock to visit the Christian holy sites. It is estimated that about half the tourists (one out of two million annually) who come to Israel every normal year (prior to the year 2,000), include Nazareth in their itinerary. Some of them stay overnight in the impressive array of Christian facilities, monasteries and hospices, that are an architectural landmark of the city, and during the daytime they stroll the overcrowded streets and add to the feeling of suffocation. In the midst of all that, stand the Old City Mansions, about 100 stately homes from the Ottoman period, with inner courtyards and gardens that provide an escape from the city's hustle and bustle. But apart from their impressive appearance, the Mansions also stand in stark contrast to the unbearable congestion and dispirited state of the dilapidated houses all around which look barely habitable.

At the core of all this is the open market which is the center of shopping activity for the local population and visitors alike. Due to its central position in the Galilee, and its size compared with the surrounding Arab villages, Nazareth – as the largest Arab town in Israel – has become a thriving center for shopping, politicking, rendering services and providing meeting places for the older and entertainment to the younger population, with its few cafés, restaurants and lone movie theater. These are the places where Christians and Muslims mix, as they do in the marketplace, where their tensions seem to dissipate amidst the picturesque artisan workshops, with their Christian handicrafts and artifacts, and the smells of the cardamom coffee and the other delights that make Nazareth's cuisine famous. Little by little, Upper Nazareth which has become the center of the Israeli government's offices and of the judiciary system, is also drawing away Arab youth from historical Nazareth. The Arab youth are lured by the more open, permissive, and modern Jewish city next door. Some of them, notably Christians, are seeking employment and housing in the new city, away from the tensions and the congestion of their problematic native town. By the end of the 1980s some 800 Arab households lived within the confines of the Jewish city, with more to come.¹⁵ But Upper Nazareth also symbolizes for the Arabs of historical Nazareth the limitations of a mixed town, where the Jews are scared of 'Arab expansion' into their city, and the Arabs resent the inroads of the Jewish city into their natural living space and the physical siege the Jewish city – itself encircled by the predominantly Arab environment – is perceived as laying to the Arab city.¹⁶

Communal Politicking

In spite of the fact that the main social activity in Nazareth during the years of Israeli statehood has been centered around politics, local and national (a matter that will be discussed in detail below), the inter-communal *rapport de force* between both Muslims and Christians and within the many denominations thereof, remains crucially – even if latently and only seldom articulated – an inter-faith issue. So, while Muslims and Christians could happily and quite efficiently collaborate within the successive versions of the Communist Party – for years the mainstay of Arab politics in Israel - as long as the demographic balance of near-parity was maintained, that seemingly idyllic relationship was marred by the dissolution of Communism and the correspondingly rising profile of Islam. The Muslim parties which make up the current majority

Islamic coalition in Nazareth are all of the same Sunni conviction, with various degrees of emphasis on the role of Islam in politics, but are not differentiated enough, nor deep-rooted enough, to constitute separate denominations. Though it is the more active hard core among them who have revived the issue of the *Waqf* properties, under circumstances that will be discussed below, the matter usually enjoys universal Muslim support. The story is different for the Christian minority, due to the historical rifts and schisms in its midst, and the traditional roles that various groups have played in the guardianship and upkeep of holy places.

The major divisions in Christianity in pre-Israeli Palestine have already been surveyed above. New Israeli laws which affected the Muslims and the Christians have altered some of the relationships within Christianity and between it and the Muslims. The focus of these changes as far as Nazareth is concerned, has been the status of holy places. Indeed, in 1967 the law for the Protection of Holy Places was enacted, and although it was primarily geared to apply to the Muslim holy sites that came under Israeli jurisdiction in the 1967 war, its effect on all holy places in the country became evident. For example, the ‘sanctity’ of the famous Ottoman *status quo* discussed above was now put into question insofar as the principle of equality and toleration now replaced the discriminatory practices of Ottoman times.¹⁷ But, according to eminent jurists,¹⁸ the law raised two difficult problems: first, whether the *status quo* ought to be abandoned when it prejudiced the prescribed freedom of access to a holy place; and, second, whether the protection of a holy place against desecration runs counter to the freedom of access which in itself can be deemed a desecration. While these problems remain unanswered,¹⁹ another issue regarding jurisdiction of courts of law over disputes concerning holy places is relevant to our Nazareth story.

In the British Order in Council of 1924 regarding holy places in Mandatary Palestine, a provision was made to deny jurisdiction of courts over these matters, due to the realization that it was impossible to decide these kinds of matters by legal tools and techniques. Therefore, the power to decide was transferred to the political realm – the British High Commissioner then, and the Israeli government now. However, in one legal case cited in the literature, some Israeli judges took the view that the Order in Council was no longer in effect today, thus allowing the courts of law in Israel to adjudicate such matters; while others thought the British enactment to be still valid. The rule that was upheld by Justice Agranat is a compromise between the two: the Order in Council in this regard is in effect, but subject to the provisions of the Israeli Law for the Protection of Holy Places. This means that in case of contradiction, the latter prevails. Hence, according to England:

The courts have jurisdiction to hear civil and criminal disputes affecting free access to the holy places and their desecration, these being matters within the purview of the Protection Law. On the other hand, there is no jurisdiction to hear other disputes affecting the holy places, such as the rights of the religious communities in these places. This continuing exclusion of jurisdiction clashes directly with the aim of preserving public order. Assume that one unlawfully enters one of the holy places or commits a criminal offence not amounting to desecration under the Protection Law. How will protection be given in the absence of jurisdiction in the courts? Again, what is to be done when free access to a holy place threatens bloodshed? Is it better to maintain the *status quo* and public order than to prejudice freedom of worship?²⁰

These difficult questions have found no definite answers in the few cases dealt with in Israeli courts since. It appears, then, that courts of law would concern themselves with matters of holy places only when public order was threatened; otherwise, they remained in the domain of the government which had to strike the balance, in each case, between the opposing demands and interests of the parties.²¹ But another major question arises as to the definition of ‘holy place’ that the courts may be called upon to ponder: can any community, at any time and place, declare

a place ‘holy’, or is the Ottoman definition, which is the foundation of the *status quo*, a definitive one that can not be altered or enlarged upon? While this issue may have been laid to rest as far as Christian holy sites are concerned, because their guardianship has been meticulously observed by the various denominations, the issue of *Waqf* properties is wide open and can be raised in an endless variety of ways. The following discussion will center on the respective problems of Christians and Muslims in Nazareth.

Christian Organizations

In Nazareth, the mosaic of Christian denominations and their particular interests are jealously guarded, and form a microcosm of the relations between these communities nationwide. The Franciscans have been the curators of the Basilica of the Annunciation since Nazareth reverted to Islamic rule at the end of the Crusades. The Maronites, Anglicans, Greek Orthodox, Copts, Protestants, and all the rest, cling to their churches, monasteries and educational institutions without claiming any particular sanctity to them. But their social involvement and their competition with each other necessarily push them into local politics. The above-mentioned Archbishop George Hakim, the Greek-Latin prelate, for example, was the consummate politician among all clerics in Mandatary Palestine and he sided with the Arab struggle against Zionism – apparently in his eagerness to prove to his fellow Arabs that his Christianity did not make him less of an Arab than his Muslim compatriots. During the battles for Haifa in 1948, he left for Lebanon, either for fear of retribution from nascent Israel for his hostile attitude, or out of belief that he might return with the victorious Arab armies after the war.

When Hakim’s dreams were shattered by the Arab defeat, he returned to Israel in 1949 and vowed to retire from politics, but he immediately dived back into his old passion and reorganized the remnants of his disbanded and traumatized community. He revived the ‘Christian Association’ which he had founded at the end of the Mandate with a view to unifying under its umbrella all Christians in Israel. To this end, he called in 1951 for a general convention in Haifa of all members of the Greek-Latin community in Israel, where religious and political institutions could be elected and an all-Christian ‘action group’ formed, but the idea died out soon after. The center of the Archbishopric was transferred from Haifa to Nazareth, but the activities of the church embraced the entire country: churches were built in villages as well as orphanages, hospitals, and hospices for the elderly. At the entrance to Nazareth he built his version of the St Joseph Church on a hill commanding much of the landscape of the city, as well as other institutions such as the ‘Order of the Galilee’, an orphanage for girls, a housing project and a hotel for pilgrims – the most outstanding of which was a Seminar for Clerics (1956), the first in the Middle East, where all instruction was in Arabic.²²

Notes

1 Yadin Roman (ed.), *Nazareth 2000* (Nazareth: Israel Government Tourist Corporation/Nazareth Municipality, n.d.), p. 12.

2 Rabinowitz, *Overlooking Nazareth*, p. 25.

3 Benny Morris, *The Birth of the Palestinian Refugee Problem* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), pp. 20CM.

- 4 Rabinowitz, *Overlooking Nazareth*, p. 28.
- 5 *Encyclopedia Hebraica*, Vol. 25, p. 357.
- 6 Rabinowitz, *Overlooking Nazareth*, p. 28.
- 7 Both the municipality and the leaders of the Christian and the Muslim communities concur with these figures. These data were gathered during interviews and discussions with both parties in 1999, as part of the attempts to settle the Muslim-Christian controversy in Nazareth regarding the construction of a new mosque in the square of the Annunciation Church which will be discussed below.
- 8 Rabinowitz, *Overlooking Nazareth*, p. 26.
- 9 Stendel, *Arabs in Israel*, p. 96.
- 10 Uzi Schmelz, 'Vital Statistics and Population Growth', in A. Layish (ed.), *The Arabs in Israel Continuity and Change* (Jerusalem, 1981), p. 38 [Hebrew].
- 11 See comparative tables in Schmelz, 'Vital Statistics', pp. 28-35. For details about emigration, see *ibid.*, pp. 36-7.
- 12 Rabinowitz, *Overlooking Nazareth*, p. 28.
- 13 *Ibid.*
- 14 Luke 4:16.
- 15 Rabinowitz, *Overlooking Nazareth*, p. 37.
- 16 *Ibid.*, especially [Ch. 2](#).
- 17 For example, discrimination against the Jews and in favor of the Muslims at the Wailing Wall in Jerusalem, which was Ottoman in origin and was upheld in the British Mandate, was now reversed by the new law.
- 18 See Englard, 'Legal Status of Holy Places', p. 5.
- 19 *Ibid.*
- 20 *Ibid.*, p. 6.
- 21 *Ibid.*, pp. 6-7.
- 22 Stendel, *Arabs in Israel*, pp. 106-7.

4.

The Politics of Nazareth

The Hub of Arab Politics in Israel

By the nature of things, as Nazareth had by far the largest concentration of Arabs in Israel, and was a thriving center for most of its well-educated Christian denominations, it also became the intellectual and political hub for the Arabs of Israel. There is hardly any idea or current – intellectual or literary, nationalist or cosmopolitan, religious or secular, moderate or extremist, pro- or anti-Israel – which was not discussed in the hot market of Nazareth before it was tossed into the general Arab public square. For Nazareth is the home both of accomplished and of frustrated ideologues; the launching pad of successful as well as of aborted ideas; the nursery where new parties and concepts emerged and the cemetery where old groups and certainties were buried. It is a *perpetuum mobile* of people, organizations, intrigues, coalitions, faiths, personalities and deals; it is the meeting point of Arab politicians, local and external; it is the place where Arab politics are made, ideas are tested, constituencies are mobilized, emotions are aroused, books, tracts and journals are written and read. In short, if there were no Nazareth, it would have had to have been invented to make Arab politics in Israel unfold.

Arab Politics Grow and Unfold

Already, in 1949, when the first national elections for the Knesset were held in Israel, the ruling Labor Party (Mapai) asked two Nazarenes – the Muslim Sayf a-Din Zu’bi and the Greek Orthodox Amin Jarjura – to join their Arab-sponsored List and they were both elected. Earlier, Zu’bi, the chieftain of the Zu’biya Clan of Nazareth had been elected member of the delegation sent by the Provisional Council of the nascent State of Israel to inform the newly elected first President, Chaim Weizman, of his new function.¹ However, concurrently with the existence of the Arab Lists² which had been allied to the ruling Mapai since the 1950s, or the cooption of Arabs into Israeli political parties in the 1960s and thereafter, a parallel under-current was under way in the form of those communists who split from the Jewish-dominated Communist Party in 1965 and undertook to establish their own communist group called the Rakah (acronym for ‘the New Communist List’). This group – while keeping some Jews at its head and in the second rank of its leadership to establish its legitimacy as an all-Israeli party – was almost all the doing of Nazarene Christian Arabs.

Since its founding, the new party has been led by five Christians, members of the Greek-Orthodox and Evangelical-Episcopalian Churches, most of them from Nazareth: Tufiq Tubi, the

famous writer Emil Habibi, Dr Emil Tuma, Hanna Naqqara and Saliba Khamis. They were all members of the Central Committee of the party, while only two token Muslims served in the same body. It was not until the end of the 1960s that the demographic balance began to shift towards the Muslims. So, while the second-level leadership still consisted mainly of Greek-Orthodox, the up-and-coming young leadership as well as the rank and file, was only up to one-third Christian and the majority were Muslims. The situation was the same in the leadership of the local chapters of the party, its journals and its youth movement.³

In 1972, the celebrated poet of Muslim descent, Tufiq Zyad, and another Muslim, Ali 'Ashur, joined the Central Committee, signaling that the shift occurring in the party rank and file had reached the top, bringing the total membership of Muslims in the upper echelon of the leadership from five to twelve. In 1973, Emil Habibi had to vacate his seat in the Knesset for Tufiq Zyad, and two years later Zyad conquered his base of power as the Mayor of Nazareth. The top leadership was still Christian but most of the second-row bench was now occupied by Muslims. In the Knesset elections of 1988 not one Christian was left in the Rakah List, even though Tufiq Tubi continued to hold the reins of the party as its Secretary General and the sons of the old Christian leaders were making their way up the ladder of the leadership.⁴

Christian Rise and Demise

It is necessary to explain not only the demise of the Christians within the Communist Party and its Rakah successor which they had founded, but their extraordinary clustering around it in the first place. We have already mentioned the perennial minority status of the Christians among their Muslim compatriots in the Middle East, and their need to present themselves as no less Arab and no less fighters for Arab causes than all the rest. This would explain why Christians stood at the apex of many Arab nationalist movements: Michel 'Aflaq in the Syrian Ba'th Party, Tariq Aziz in Iraq, Butrus Ghali in Egypt, George Habash and Na'if Hawatmeh in the Palestinian Liberation Organization (PLO). But there is also a 'religious' explanation which assumes that Arab nationalism is usually tinged with a heavy dose of Islam as one of its essential components, and that Christians would have nothing to do with it. Consequently, they would drift towards the non-religious or anti-religious brands of nationalism, such as the Ba'th or the Communists, or other shades of Socialism and Marxism, in which faith is irrelevant and political action is guided by a secular ideology. The Marxist Democratic Front of Hawatmeh and the Popular Front of Habash, within the PLO, are good examples of this trend.

However, there must also have been other particular reasons. Nazareth was one of three cities (the others were Haifa and Shefar'am) where the Christians either were, or were becoming, a majority in 1948. The Christians were more urban than their Muslim compatriots, which meant also more educated and more modernized. They were also more westernized by virtue of ongoing ties with their home churches and their educational institutions at all levels.⁵ It was natural, then, that Christian intellectuals who needed to evince their commitment to Arab causes should drift to leadership positions in the one party (Communist and then Rakah) which was seen as the paragon and expression of Palestinian nationalism among Israeli Arabs. That leadership, which was quite strident in its criticism of Israel and its Arab policy, crystalized its ideology around those themes.

Little can be said about the truly Marxist ideology which imbued and motivated that Christian

leadership which was far more bourgeois in its lifestyle than members of the nearby Israeli *kibbutzim*, that abided more by kibbutz principles than by the precepts of utopian communism: common means of production, egalitarianism, the rule of the proletariat, giving according to one's ability and getting according to one's needs. In this regard, the Christian élite practiced politics of protest which were very popular among the Arabs of Israel – rather than taught the merits of socialism in theory or as practiced in the Soviet Union and the Communist Bloc – and this won them a large constituency. In addition, toeing the Soviet line allowed these Christians to show their public that they enjoyed the backing of a Super Power, and, in doing so, to skirt the issue of religion, particularly Islam, in their political venture.

In practice, not only did the support of the Soviet Union – also a staunch ally of Arab nationalism super-hero Abd-al-Nasser – enhance the stature of those Christian leaders among their Israeli constituents, but it also gave them a hinterland where they could dispatch their youth for education and conferences; and a universally recognized political Mecca with which they could identify. But, as Tsimhony has shown,⁶ this Christian élite, taking advantage of the Arab political vacuum created in post-1948 Israel due to the departure of most of the Muslim leadership, acted simultaneously on four fronts, only one of which was the Communist option. But the others are also significant for the understanding of the Nazareth political arena.

The first was the attempt of Christian leaders to join the existing Israeli parties in spite of the latter's Zionist ideology. But the Jewish parties were in no hurry to recruit Arab membership; they elected to coopt and ally with separate Arab Lists, which became in fact 'vote machines' committed less to ideology than to the benefits that they derived from partnership with the establishment. Thus, the 'Democratic List', founded in Nazareth in 1949 in collaboration with the Mapai Labor ruling party, was headed (as explained above) by wealthy notables from two respected local families: Zu'bi and Jarjura, one Muslim and the other Greek-Orthodox, who were elected Knesset members. Only during the elections for the eighth Knesset (1973), did the Labor Party directly include Arabs in its list of candidates side-by-side with the continued existence of allied 'independent' Lists. On that occasion, the Druze delegate was given priority in the second spot over the Christian, 'Azar 'Artui of Nazareth, who was not elected. This was the first time Christian Arabs were not elected to represent the Labor Party or its affiliates.

It was not until the 1977 elections that the ruling party decided to merge its allied Arab Lists completely with its own candidates; but, since no Christians were elected to the list, those who would otherwise have joined the party were pushed out to find alternative options for political expression. Only in the smaller socialist Mapam Party, which had directly recruited Arabs to its ranks since 1954, did they remain prominent in the list. In the 1965 elections, a second representative of the Muslim Zu'bi clan of Nazareth, 'Abd-al-'Aziz, was elected to the Knesset on this list. Another Nazarene, Greek-Orthodox Ibrahim Shbat, became the Editor of *al-Mirsad*, the Arabic-language organ of Mapam. In 1949 a 'Nazareth Workers League' had been established headed by the Latin Nadim Batkhish, but it ultimately blended into other groups. As young non-Christians came of age, they took over local leaderships: for example, when George Sa'd, the Labor Party man in Nazareth, retired in the 1980s, a Druze from 'Usfiyya replaced him.

As the Christians became marginalized, they sought outlets for their political energies in separate organizations of their own. But their attempts were frustrated by the weight of demography which shifted gradually in favor of the Muslims. In other words, demography was to play a crucial role against all attempts of the Christians to retain their initial dominance in Arab politics in Israel generally and in Nazareth in particular. As they were ejected from the Lists allied to the ruling party, and were replaced by Muslims (and Druze), they tried to go their

own way; but when that proved vain, they drifted towards the Communists. However, when the new Muslim leadership took over that party too, they faced the choice of either running back to the Jewish-dominated parties, or taking a more extreme route. To opt for the former would have been interpreted by the Muslim Arabs as a cop-out and collaboration with the ruling Zionist majority. Therefore they chose all shades of radicalism including ‘communism’ in all its manifestations.

The latter choice seemed to be the most attractive for the Arabs in Israel generally, and for the Christians particularly; especially among the Greek-Orthodox, who had always been part and parcel of the Palestinian national struggle, and among the tiny Protestant denominations who nurtured Arabic language and culture in their followers.⁷ The communists, headed at the time by their abovementioned Nazarene leaders, Tubi and Habibi, became the main spokesmen of Israeli Arabs, as they were the most articulate activists in favor of full equality and against confiscations of Arab lands. Those communist leaders, instead of embarking on the international cosmopolitanism taught by their masters in Moscow, became narrow Arab-Palestinian nationalists, who soon shook off the predominance of their Jewish leadership and founded their own almost all-Arab Rakah Party. What made them even more popular was their plea for self-determination for the Arab minority in Israel, which would have meant secession of Arab-majority areas from the State of Israel. To attain this goal, they demanded that the Jewish settlement in the Galilee, such as the newly founded town of Upper Nazareth, be halted in order not to foreclose the possibility of their joining an Arab entity in any future peace negotiations. Habibi also made clear his wish to see Palestinians return to their former homes in the heart of Israel.⁸

The propensity of the Greek-Orthodox and the Protestant Arabs towards nationalistic tendencies, made them more receptive to the Rakah message than to hidden (or misunderstood) Marxist hair-splitting niceties. When the Israeli authorities were not forthcoming in response to those Christians’ plea for the total Arabization of their churches, they naturally fell into the open arms of the communists. In Nazareth, notably, they achieved a majority in the local councils of their churches, particularly the Greek-Orthodox. But, paradoxically, at the same time as many Christians were flocking to the Communists – many in protest against Israel – their numbers were decreasing until their proportion shrank from 20 percent of the total Arab population in 1948, back to the 10 percent registered during the Mandate. The Muslims, who now became the majority of the communist constituency, refused to allow the leaderships to be almost monopolized by the Christians as of old. Thus, in 1972, five Muslims, including Tufiq Zyad, attained membership of the Central Committee, which comprised 12 members. In Muslim Nazareth there was great jubilation when Muslim Zyad replaced Christian Habibi in the eighth Knesset in 1973, and even more so when he was elected to the Mayor-ship of the city in 1975.⁹

Concurrently with the predominance of the Marxists, other Arab nationalist activists in Israeli politics, Muslim and Christian alike, many of them based in Nazareth – such as Elias Kussa and Nimr al-Hawari – drew from the same sources of inspiration as the communists and embraced much of the same ideology: the parity of Arabic with Hebrew as an official language of Israel; reducing taxes for Arabs; and protecting the Muslim *Awqaf* as well as the assets of Arab churches and their educational institutions. But this sort of activity outside the solid, popular, and deep-rooted Communist Party proved ephemeral. Christians in particular were active in such groups as the extremist *al-Ard*, which was later outlawed due to its refusal to recognize Israel’s legitimacy. There were small groups of intellectuals and writers, some of them also active in the Communist Party, such as Mansur Kardush and Taher Fahum from Nazareth who were both

active in those circles.

But at the end of the 1950s this group merged with the communists, since both were advocating the same line of Arab nationalism. When in May 1958, the communists in Nazareth launched a massive demonstration in town which resulted in a violent clash with police, both the communist leaders, Habibi and Naqqara, and the nationalists founded the 'Public Committee for the Protection of the Arrested Demonstrators.' Those who collaborated within the Committee declared at the end of the same year the establishment of the 'Arab Front' as an umbrella for Arab nationalists in Israel. This appellation which was not likely to gain legitimacy in the eyes of the Israeli authorities was altered to the 'Popular Front'. The new Front published a platform, not dissimilar to the communist program, and established branches in Haifa and the Galilee, chief among them in Nazareth. Once again, due to the duplication of the communist message, it was dissolved in 1959. *Al-Ard* – mentioned above – was the outcome, once again led by Christian intellectuals who continued to carry the banner of extreme Arab nationalism which was shunned even by the communists. Elias Mu'ammam from Nazareth was one of the heads of the movement, as were other Greek-Catholics, in contrast with the Greek-Orthodox leadership of the Communists. Taher Fahum, from a prominent Muslim Nazarene family, was also in the top ranks of leadership. But the group was so extreme that it never became a mass movement.¹⁰

In 1974 Nazareth hosted a conference – again, a Christian initiative – of the Heads of Arab Councils in the Galilee, which later grew into the national Committee of the Heads of Arab Councils (CHAC), an umbrella group for all Arabs in Israel, that expanded into the Monitoring Committee (1982) when Arab Knesset members and representatives of other Arab grassroot organizations were coopted into that organization.¹¹ In 1975, Rakah was rebaptized 'Hadash' (an acronym of The Front for Democracy and Equality) and won seats in many mayoral local elections, the most important of which was in Nazareth. The first 'Land Day' of 30 March 1976, which was masterminded in Nazareth, catapulted to national prominence the CHAC, changing it from a docile establishment concerned with rural problems in Arab villages into a strident political organization which made far-reaching demands from Israel, and recommended radical means to attain their implementation. New voluntary organizations were founded in Nazareth and elsewhere which acquired a nationalistic and/or Muslim character, eclipsing the almost-total Christian monopoly of such organizations in town. These organizations included the 'Muslim Brothers,' and the 'Sons of the Village.' In Nazareth in particular the new organizations had an intellectual and cultural character; some of them were led by Christians such as the above-mentioned Mansur Kardush. *Al-Sawt* (The Voice), formed in 1978, was just such a group – an association geared to heighten Arab national and cultural consciousness. This group was joined by Ryah abu-'Asal, the Head of the Evangelical-Episcopalian Church in Nazareth, and by other prominent Christians such as Dr Khalil Nakhleh and Dr Jamal Ka'war.¹²

Al-Sawt campaigned for the establishment of an Arab University in Nazareth, as an expression of Arab nationalism; but precisely for that reason the Israeli Council of Higher Education refused to accredit it. As a result, the group turned to cultivation of the Palestinian heritage and folklore, in cooperation with Catholic schools, and set up a publishing house for the dissemination of its ideas. In 1982, in preparation for the forthcoming 1983 local elections, a new party called 'The Progressive List for Peace' was founded in Nazareth by local radical intellectuals, *Al-Sawt*, and individuals who had left Rakah and now became its rivals for the Arab-nationalist constituency. Christians joined the new List with the blessing of Nathaniel Shehadeh, the head of the Greek-Catholic Church in the city; and church leader Ryah abu-al 'Asal became its secretary. Muslims also joined, such as the prominent lawyer, Kamil al-Zahir. The List won 4 (out of 17) seats in the

Nazareth City Council, and in 1984 ran for the national elections to the Knesset with a platform more radical than that of the Hadash Party, which only insinuated its support for a Palestinian state to replace Israel. Despite the equal number of Christians and Muslims among its leadership, however, the rank and file were Muslims; it therefore collaborated more closely than its communist rival with Muslim movements.¹³ None of the Christian leaders and founders was elected to the Knesset, not even the List's Secretary. The two seats gained in the Knesset were occupied by a Muslim and a Jew. However, the neo-communist Hadash continued to predominate in Nazareth where it won half the votes in the city in the general elections of 1984, a higher proportion than anywhere else in Arab towns and villages in Israel. This is perhaps a sign of the success that Tufiq Zyad had in consolidating the voters behind him then and in the many years to come.

The Tufiq Zyad Era

Until the mid 1970s, municipal government in Nazareth was dominated by local parties associated with the ruling Mapai Party and its derivatives, whose power was based on family connections and who were totally incompetent in administrative and urban affairs. So much so, that in 1974 Prime Minister Golda Meir appointed a commission of inquiry, which recommended the disbanding of the city council and placing city affairs in the hands of an appointed council manned by officials of the Ministry of the Interior. However, in the local elections of 1975, the first where mayors were elected directly, the Muslim rising star of the communists, Tufiq Zyad, who led a local party of his own creation (The Nazareth Democratic Front), garnered a stunning 70 percent of the vote. His victory, and the establishment of the first communist-led city in Israel, created apprehension in the Israeli government which regarded Rakah as an enemy. In consequence, the Israeli Ministry of the Interior refused to cooperate with him, probably hoping that his isolation would bring about his downfall. The Nazareth Democratic Front led by the Muslim Zyad, in collaboration with his new city council, revolutionized city politics and administration and was re-elected by a landslide in the next elections of 1979. Then, a new city councillor, a young, educated and able engineer of 27, the Christian Ramiz Jeraysi, was elected deputy mayor. In effect he would be the city manager while his boss was engaged in national politics.¹⁴

Zyad, who was also a prominent Knesset member on behalf of the Hadash Party, became the effective 'Foreign Minister' of Nazareth, as he could lobby the government offices and wheel and deal with other parties and government ministers for the interests of his city as well as for all Arabs in Israel. He thus became their most formidable spokesman during his 20 years of tenure in both the Knesset and City Hall until his death in a traffic accident in 1994. He was a very colorful man with great rhetorical skills, an enthusiastic Arab nationalist and a vociferous debater who often crossed the borders of decency in his fiery speeches from the rostrum of the Knesset or in his gross, and often obscene, *impromptu* interpolations into others' speeches. But his excesses made him all the more popular in Nazareth and on the Arab streets, because he was seen as the one Arab leader who dared, without frills or hesitation, to confront the Israeli establishment and make it budge. Not only did he escape unscathed, but – what was more – his insolence seemed to enhance his stature and to earn him more influence in the corridors of power.

Zyad's notoriety was earned, first and foremost, by his mastery of the Arabic language which allowed him to arouse the masses, to touch their hearts with his powerful metaphors and lyrical passion. He was a poet, one of the most prominent in Israel, who never relented from advertising his poetry as a tool in the service of his politics,¹⁵ something which was not entirely foreign to Arab poetry in general and which mobilized Palestinian poetry in particular. He directly, bluntly and often abusively – bordering on, or even crossing the line of verbal violence – attacked Israel and Zionism as ‘criminals’, as ‘agents of imperialism’; and he made no secret of his militant Palestinian identity which was in opposition to the country in which he lived and the parliament in which he served. His writings are vast and varied, not only in the field of poetry but also in his prose and literary criticism. Following A. Yinnon,¹⁶ we shall outline here, very briefly, the main themes of his poetry which are indicative of his personality and political thinking, and thus relevant to our Nazareth story.

Already in the 1950s, before he attained political prominence, Zyad rebelled against the heavy taxation levied by the ‘[Israeli] robbers’ who want to ‘turn our country into cemeteries and piles of ruins,’ and warned that the ‘[Israeli] warmonger would be toppled by the fists of the toiling people.’ He dubbed the Israeli authorities a ‘reactionary gang which extends its criminal tentacles ... and erects “peace” upon skulls ... we shall march towards the sunrise, towards victory over the regime of slavery. ...’¹⁷ In 1958 he served a term in prison following a violent demonstration in Nazareth against the police in which he participated as a member of the city council. In jail, he wrote one of his most poignant and vindictive poems, *Behind the Bars*, where he savored his moral victory over what he saw as his oppressors:

You, gang of evil-doers whom I made drink
The cup of humiliation of my poetry;
Whom I sank in the mud up to their necks,
But my neck remained upright;
To whose face I have spat
My hatred, for my life of bondage.
You, gang of coward monsters ...
Don't you think that armored steel
Can vanquish lion-hearts ...¹⁸

During his one-year tour of study in Moscow (1963-64), he combined languishing in self-imposed exile with another attack on the Israeli soldiers who ‘hoisted the beloved one on their bayonet tips’, alluding, of course, to his home in Nazareth. In the Arab-Israeli military clashes he not only sided with the Arabs, but also celebrated Arab victories, real or imagined, against Israel and the West. In Port Sa'id during the 1956 Suez War, he lauded the Egyptian humiliation of the British and the French, and in 1973 he sang in his *The Great Crossing*, the praise of the ‘sacred’ Egyptian and Syrian successes against his country. His poems about the 1973 war – which was very traumatic for the Israeli public – occasioned an outrage in the press and in the Knesset, especially his brow-raising admiration for the Arab martyrs and his use of religious Islamic concepts from which he had distanced himself as a devout Marxist.¹⁹

As could be expected, Zyad became a popular idol among the Arab young in Israel and his image went sky-rocketing. The Nazareth municipality under him became the sponsor of Palestinian national events: in 1981, following the Palestinian Heritage Week celebrated in Nazareth on 6-11 April, he declared that ‘democratic Nazareth was planning to set up a museum for Palestinian folklore.’²⁰

Typically, it was Father Emile Shufani, the principal of the town's Anglican highschool, who

organized the events in order to implant in the Arab students a deep love of their land. His feelings were shared by Tufiq Ziad, who also urged the Arabs of Israel to record their heritage in literary Arabic so that it could be preserved and translated into other languages.²¹ It was an Anglican cleric, Na'im 'Atiq from Nazareth who elaborated the 'Palestinian Liberation Theology', along the lines of the liberation theologies of South America.²² In April 1982, the Greek-Orthodox Patriarch, Diodoros, decorated Tufiq Ziad with the highest medal of the community during his visit to Nazareth – the Medal of the Curator of the Holy Sepulchre – for his service to the people of Nazareth. That was the first time such an honour had been accorded to a Muslim.²³ It was this united front of Christians-Rakah-Muslims among Israeli Arabs which Ziad can be credited for forging and promoting; this yielded in the 1980s the stunning finding that most Israeli Arabs sided with the enemies of their country.²⁴

In April 1983, the magazine *Al-Rabitah* published the platform of the Nazareth Progressive Movement which suggested that Land Day, celebrated since 1976, be turned into a symbol for the continuous struggle against the confiscation of Arab lands. This proposal also advocated the establishment of a Land Fund, not unlike the Jewish National Fund, with the purpose of protecting Arab lands.²⁵ Evidently, this platform was meant to hurt Ziad's Hadash Party in the town by highlighting his idleness in promoting the struggle for Arab lands,²⁶ beyond the annual ceremonial commemoration of March 30. In May of the same year a conference was held in Nazareth to establish an umbrella Muslim organization in Israel in order to claim jurisdiction of the *Awqaf* throughout the country. That was a replay of the same idea of six years earlier, when the communists had attempted to launch their 'General Muslim Board' which had ended in nothing.²⁷ Curiously enough, it was the organ of the communists in Nazareth which charged the new board with being 'undemocratic', probably fearing that it might make a dent in their power in the approaching local elections.²⁸

Great turbulence shook Nazareth politics in the run up to the 1983 local elections, which the communists under Ziad were poised to win once again, since they had displaced Labor Party ally, Sayf a Din Zu'bi in 1975 and allied themselves with local academics to form their Democratic Front. In 1978 they had won again by maintaining their dominance within the Front. But, in 1981, the academics who had helped Rakah to come to power in town, headed by Kamil al-Zahir, Deputy Mayor for Financial Affairs, abandoned their coalition with Ziad and joined the newly established nationalist Progressive List for Peace (already discussed above). Ziad's Rakah Party was concerned for its continued hegemony in Nazareth politics, which also meant its dominance, often backed by the PLO,²⁹ over the politics of Arabs in Israel. In the end, partly due to the unexpected support from extreme nationalist groups³⁰ who feared the newcomer Progressive List more than the old communist rival, the Front gained six percent over the previous elections and retained the majority on the city council (11 out of 17 seats). Ziad was handsomely re-elected, reaping the credit for his and his Front's success. His party had publicized in its organ, just prior to the elections, his poem lauding the 'Great Crossing' of the Egyptians in the 1973 War,³¹ a feat of Arab nationalism that was hard to beat. Needless to say, the success of Ziad and the seats won by the new Progressive List meant in effect the end of the support for Labor and other establishment parties in city politics.

Ziad's success in local politics spilled over into national politics when, in the general elections of 1984, more than half the Arab population in Israel voted for Hadash and in fact for the new CHAC, which had practically adopted the communist's platform under Ziad's instigation.³²

In September 1984, against a background of what was perceived by the Israeli public as the radicalization of Israeli Arabs (as evidenced in their clustering around Arab nationalistic parties during the general elections three months earlier), the President of the State of Israel Haim Herzog made an official visit to Nazareth, the first of its kind in 25 years. On that occasion, Mayor Zyad granted his guest the honorary citizenship of the city, but did not hesitate to put across his nationalistic message which had won him stature among his constituency:

You are visiting today a city which is the Mother of the Galilee, the beating heart of the Arab citizens, the holy city of peace, fraternity and love ... It is high time that your policy and attitude towards Nazareth, the Arab sector [in Israel], and the Arab people in general be altered and become based on complete equality ... Kahanism has grown³³ on the fertile ground of the official [Israeli] policy towards its Arab citizens, a policy of national repression that has been systematically pursued by all Israeli governments, daily and in all domains of life.³⁴

Zyad was also the mover behind the annual Summer Camps which were a means of mobilizing the Arab youth to his party. The ninth camp was held in Nazareth and the adjoining villages of Rameh and Tamra in August 1984. In Nazareth alone some 2,500 volunteers, some of them from the West Bank and Gaza, participated in maintenance works throughout the city: mending fences, paving roads, refurbishing schools, mosques and cemeteries, thus saving the city government large sums of money. Local as well as city contractors donated the machinery, building materials and skilled labor. After their work, participants were fed with doctrinal lectures, stressing the importance for the Arabs of volunteer work, and of strengthening the links among the Palestinian people. As in previous years, some volunteers were recruited from abroad. The coverage given to the camp in the Arabic press spread its echo throughout the Arab population of Israel and drove home the point that, in spite of the deprivation suffered by the Arab villages and towns by reason of discrimination against them in government budgets, Rakah was there to compensate for the material deficiencies by its spirit and organizing capacities.

The demise of the Soviet Union, followed by the Gulf crisis in 1990-91, sent Rakah and its leaders into disarray. Zyad continued to be popular personally in Nazareth, but – while persisting in leading his shrinking party in national politics – had a hard time adapting to the new scene. In the embarrassment caused by the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait and the pro-Iraqi stand adopted by Arafat, Zyad declared that concerns over the invasion of an Arab country by another had to be set aside in the face of the much larger concern about the return of American Imperialism to the Middle East.³⁵ So, despite the decrease in grassroots support for the communists, compared with their heyday in the 1970s and 1980s, the Mayor of Nazareth was still a pivotal figure in the politics of Arabs in Israel, as evidenced in his repeated re-election, both to the Knesset and to the mayorship, until his tragic death in 1994.

A new power loomed on the horizon, which had begun its almost imperceptible rise back at the end of the 1970s, and was to be a major contender against the Rakah Party in many Arab towns and villages throughout the country. The much newer and smaller Progressive List was almost totally swamped in this new wave of rising Islamic fundamentalism, but the communists under Zyad and the emerging new leadership, could still hold their own in general, yet not in Nazareth. The next chapter will tell that story.

Notes

- 1 See Stendel, *Overlooking Nazareth*, p. 3.
- 2 'Lists' are political organizations that are not quite parties; they are formed on an *ad-hoc* basis in order to put forward candidates for elections.
- 3 Ibid., p. 98.
- 4 Ibid.
- 5 Daphne Tsimhoni, 'The Political Configuration of the Christians in the State of Israel', *The New East*, 32, (1989), pp. 139-40.
- 6 Ibid. The following discussion is based on pp. 140-60.
- 7 Ibid., pp. 148-9.
- 8 Ibid., p. 150.
- 9 Ibid., pp. 154-6.
- 10 Ibid.
- 11 These organizations included: The Committee Against Land Confiscation; The Students' Committee; and The *Waqf* Board (see Tsimhoni, 'Political Configuration of Christians', p. 157).
- 12 Ibid., pp. 158-9.
- 13 Ibid.
- 14 Roman, *Nazareth 2000*, pp. 12-13.
- 15 In the Introduction to Zyad's *Diwan: Collection of Poems* (Beirut, 1972), the Editor wrote that political commitment was more important for the poet than the literary aspect of his work.
- 16 Abraham Yinnon, 'Tawfiq Zayyad: "We Are the Majority Here"', in A. Layish (ed.), *Arabs in Israel*, pp. 213¹⁰.
- 17 Ibid., pp. 214-15 [English translation by Raphael Israeli].
- 18 Ibid., p. 216.
- 19 Ibid., pp. 234-8.
- 20 *Al-Ittihad*, 17 April (1981).
- 21 See *Leket*, 4 (May 1981), p. 6; issued by the Prime Minister's Adviser for the Arab Affairs Bureau.
- 22 *Ha'aretz*, 13 November (1990).
- 23 *Al-Anba'*, 9 April (1982).
- 24 According to a survey from 1980, 'at least part of the Arabs in Israel rejoiced at Israel's hurt and three-fifths either justified or rejoiced at learning about Jewish fellow citizens killed in Fedayeen actions.' See Sami Smooha and Don Peretz, 'The Arabs in Israel', *Journal of Conflict Resolution*, 26, 3 (1982), pp. 451-84.
- 25 The text of the Platform was published in *Al-Rabitah* (April 1983).
- 26 For the background on the Arab land issue, see Jacques Kano, *The Problem of Land Between Jews and Arabs (1917-90)* (Tel Aviv: Sifriat Poalim, 1992) [Hebrew]. See also, E. Regev, *Israeli Arabs: Political Issues. Discussion Paper No. 12* (Jerusalem: The Jerusalem Research Institute, 1989), p. 36ff. [Hebrew].
- 27 *Ma'ariv*, 13 May (1983).
- 28 *Al-Ittihad*, 25 May (1983).
- 29 For example, Ibid., 22 May (1981).
- 30 Ibid., 9 October (1983), carried an appeal to the citizens of Nazareth on behalf of the Sons of the Village and Telem – two nationalist Arab groups – to support the Democratic Front in the elections.
- 31 Ibid., 14 October (1983).
- 32 *Al-Anba'*, 9 February (1984).
- 33 This is a reference to the short stint during that period in Jewish politics of a Jewish racist extremist, Rabbi Meir Kahana. He won a seat in the Knesset, but was boycotted by the entire membership of the House and shunned by the public in general. He was later banned from running for the next election because of his racist views, and he was murdered by an Arab in New York.
- 34 *Al-Ittihad*, 14 September (1984).
- 35 *Ha'aretz*, 5 September (1990).

5.

The Rise of the Islamic Movement

When Tufiq Zyad was killed in 1994 in the prime of his career and at the height of his municipal and political activities, his fellow party member, the Christian Deputy Mayor Ramiz Jeraysi (42 years old), was chosen by the city council, which was still dominated by the Communist Democratic Front, to take up the post of Mayor. Jeraysi, a talented – and by now the most experienced – council member and Deputy Mayor, seemed like the natural choice for municipal affairs, though it was evident that he had neither the stature nor the religious conviction of the emerging Muslim majority in the city. Zyad could not be challenged by any one else, not only because of his personal popularity, but also because of the political backing that his Democratic Front had elicited from the Nazareth populace in the preceding 20 years. Now that Zyad was gone, the Muslim majority felt that it could crystallize its constituents not only in favor of the Islamic Lists but also in opposition to the discredited Communist Party and its new local chief, the Christian Jeraysi.

The Question of Islamic Identity

The question of identity among the Arab minority in Israel is a complex one, but one can detect four concentric circles revolving around it: Israeli, Palestinian, Arab and Islamic/Christian. These four are not exclusive of each other but rather cumulative, something like the layers of an onion. The constant search for identity among the Arabs in Israel seems to have crystalized into an incremental construct whereby they adopt at the same time any combination of those identities with the emphases veering in accordance with their perceived place in Israeli society, with regional and international developments, and especially with their understanding of the fortunes of the Arab-Israeli dispute. They never seem to be willing to wear one single tag, always embracing two or more choices at the same time, sometimes emphasizing one, at other times insisting upon another. For example, when they clamor for equal rights, they make their appeal in the name of their Israeli citizenship; when they demonstrate in favor of their Palestinian brethren, they emphasize their Palestinian and Arab links and patrimony; when they sympathize with other Muslims, they invoke their Muslim heritage; and when their communal interests are at stake, the spectre of Muslims versus Christians is raised.

As long as the politics of the Arabs in Israel were dominated by the secular Communist-Rakah-Hadash Party, in which Muslims and Christians collaborated in their common struggle against the policies of the Jewish-Zionist state, their communal differences were pushed to the sidelines and considered minor or nonexistent. Moreover, we have seen that prominent clerics from most Christian denominations in the country in general, and in Nazareth in particular, took

the lead in Arab-Palestinian nationalism and its various political, social and cultural ramifications. At that time, being Arab and Palestinian was considered more important to many than one's affiliation to Islam or Christianity; and both dwarfed the Israeli component of one's identity. But, with the rise of the Islamic Movement in Israel, which by necessity sharpened the differences between Muslims and Christians within the Arab community, and especially with the decline of the communists in Arab politics and their take-over by the Muslims, the Christians were compelled to seek alternative ways of political expression. Nowhere else was this trend so dramatically expressed as in Nazareth, a city that was once Christian and is now increasingly Islamized. At no time was this process so drastic as in Nazareth after the death of Tufiq Ziyad, whose towering figure was no longer present to unify the citizens and to blur the differences between Christians and Muslims, and whose nationalistic politics had dwarfed parochial bickerings.

Israeli Muslims Radicalize

The genesis of Islamic fundamentalism in Israel cannot be divorced from the surge of militant Islam the world over. Indeed, the victory of Islam in such states as Iran, Sudan and Afghanistan, and its significant inroads in other Muslim countries such as Algeria, Lebanon, Jordan, Egypt and Pakistan, has resulted in the identification of militant Islam in terms of religio-nationalism.¹ Thus, many Muslim Arabs in Israel have come to cling to their Islamic identity more markedly than to their Arab or Palestinian stock, as a divide separating them from non-Muslims and as a common denominator attaching them to other Muslims. Thus, while many of the differences between the Jewish majority and the Arab minority in Israel are often bridgeable by common language, economic interest and neighborly relations, the Muslim radicals – who have injected massive doses of Islamic symbolism into the Arab-Israeli conflict – have often lent to it a religio-cultural veneer, thus turning it into a qualitatively insoluble dispute. In turn, Muslim fundamentalists in Israel, who would perhaps otherwise accept their minority status and adjust to the vagaries of life under a Jewish authority, once imbued with the general mode of thinking of other Muslim radicals, tend also to increase their anti-Israeli and anti-Christian rhetoric and attitudes. Their anti-Jewish posture has impelled them to rebel against the Jewish State, and their historical anti-Christian bitterness is pushing them to eliminate the rule of Christians over Muslim communities such as in Islamized Nazareth.

The Muslims of Israel, even more than other Muslims worldwide, feel resentment and frustration at their inability to regain rule over their Holy Land and holy places. For they experience in an immediate fashion the humiliation of being ruled by an erstwhile *dhimmi* people which had itself, for long centuries, submitted to Islamic rule and which had been depicted in Islamic tradition as having a questionable reputation. The pious among them cannot overlook the vehement anti-Jewish and anti-Israeli arguments advanced by the masters of radical Islam all around them.² Add to that the general sense of discrimination among these Muslims, their uphill battle to gain equal treatment in the rights and services extended to them by the state, and the impossible emotional gap between their country of citizenship and their coreligionists in the Arab and Islamic camps, and you have a recipe for contradictions, soul-searching, upheaval and radicalism. Some of these tensions are tapped by radical Muslim leaders among Israeli Arabs and directed towards the revival of the Muslim faith. Indeed, more mosques have been built in Israel

during the past two decades than ever before, and more expressions of Muslim radicalism in politics, in social organizations and in local government have come to the fore than at any time before. Islamic associations, which had watched local *Waqf* affairs or dealt with social welfare, suddenly took to election campaigns and became involved in local and national politics. Like the Muslim Brothers of Egypt, they have accumulated large enough pools of goodwill among the population, by their caring leadership, devoted work for the community and networks of charity and educational and health services, to be able to expect political support from their constituencies.

The process of Islamization seemed to many Muslims the way out of their identity crisis whereby they could not identify with their country from which they felt alienated; and they sympathized with their Muslim brethren who were in a state of war with Israel. They felt that together with other Muslims they constituted the wave of the future, and therefore they sought links with their Islamized Palestinian kin in the territories occupied by Israel in 1967, and beyond them to Jordan, Egypt and other Arab and Islamic countries where fundamentalist movements were active. After 1967, Muslims in Israel began inviting renowned Palestinian clerics from the West Bank and Gaza to deliver sermons in mosques, schools and social gatherings. In consequence, the ideologies and doctrines of the Islamic Liberation Party of old, and of the Muslim Brothers, were propagated and became household words among the Muslim Arabs of Israel. Conversely, the Muslims of Israel who attended Islamic institutions of higher learning in those territories, and returned to their communities in Israel imbued with the new Islamic revivalist spirit.

These developments had an immediate impact on the Muslims in Israel: a massive return to Islam among the young, in tandem with a similar trend on the West Bank and in Gaza. The Islamic Movement gained further impetus in those years following the Iranian Revolution and the emergence in Egypt and Syria of such groups which called, and acted, for toppling the regimes in those countries. As a result, some Muslim fundamentalists in Israel, like their counterparts in neighboring Arab countries, decided to effect the transition from quietist ideology and rhetoric to action and violence. A tiny group among them, *Usrat al-Jihad* (The Family of Jihad, or Holy War), indeed set out to launch a war against Israel and targeted some economic projects until it was apprehended in its entirety – including its founder and leader, Sheikh Abdallah Nimr Darwish – and imprisoned.³ This outburst of Islamic violence understandably put the Muslim community in Israel on the defensive. For while some of them were conceivably in favor of an Islamic revival, they did not intend to turn violently against Israel and to endanger the very existence of their entire community. Thus, the Muslim leadership condemned the group and temporarily closed the lid on the entire revivalist movement. However, the radical part of the movement survived in Israeli prisons where discussions continued between the inmates who were attempting to chart, together, a post-jail future. After their release from jail, following their pledge that they would no longer engage in violence, they formed, together with others, what came to be known as the Muslim Youth Movement. This organization has dominated the revivalist movement in Israel since the early 1980s, and it has been avowedly more quietist in its approach, observing the strictures of law.

Sheikh Abdallah of Kafr Qassem became a guru for many frustrated Muslims in Israel, especially when his well-earned reputation as a devoted leader who cared for his community spread. Indeed, he was credited with weaning drug addicts from their abysmal state, and with organizing a vast network of charity and welfare services for his constituents. Soon, Muslim believers began flocking to him from towns and villages in the Galilee and central Israel, to be

enlightened by his teachings. Outwardly, he and his disciples adopted the slogan of activity and change by peaceful means within the strictures of law. But, judging from the infrastructure they were preparing in some of their villages, one suspects that the more fanatical among them were dedicated to building their own Islamic enclaves, calculated to free themselves gradually from the grip of the Jewish state. This trend gained momentum in the towns and villages ruled by radical Islamists, led by Sheikh Ra'id Salah of Umm al-Fahm, who split in the late 1990s from the mainstream which remains under the aegis of Sheikh Abdallah. This led to a two-pronged Islamic Movement: a pragmatic versus a radical group. The circumstances under which the split occurred will be discussed below, but first let us address ourselves to the 1980s and early 1990s when the pre-schism Islamic Movement was taking shape.⁴

Diffusion of the Islamic Message

Umm al-Fahm, which has become undeniably the hub of Muslim fundamentalism in Israel, owes its status to Sheikh Ra'id, a local youth who attended the Islamic College in Hebron in 1976, and after graduating in 1979 began roaming the country and preaching a return to Islamic values. An Islamic Association was set up locally, as in other places, to step into the social and cultural vacuum left by the lack of socio-economic involvement of the Israeli government in the township. The Islamic message had a tremendous appeal to the unskilled laborers who worked in Tel Aviv and other Israeli urban centers, and underwent daily humiliation in their encounters with Israeli prosperity and cultural assertiveness. It also appealed to the youth who were seeking new avenues and new answers, and to professionals who were in search of new channels for their nationalism and new definitions of national identity. The movement also attracted the rank and file who observed and partook, with admiration and pride, in the welfare projects that the local Muslim Movement led by the young sheikh, was undertaking in the township.

The municipal elections of February 1989 signaled to the Israeli public in general, and the Arab-Islamic sector in particular, that the Muslim Movement had changed from a religio-cultural pursuit for born-again Muslims into a religio-political organization intent on seeking power as a way to implement its program. Indeed, while in 1983 only one mayor from the Islamic Movement had been returned by the polls, in the small village of Kafr Bara, the year 1989 saw five Islamist mayors elected, including Sheikh Ra'id, together with another 45 councilmen in various municipalities and local councils. Hence, the belief among the Muslim population in Israel that they had reached the watershed, borne out of the euphoria stimulated by that success; a euphoria which had been expressed during the election campaign by the slogans: 'Islam is the Solution!', 'Islam is the Alternative!', and 'Islam is the Truth!'. One of the Arab villages most affected by this upsurge of Islam was Kafr Kanna (the biblical Cana-in-Galilee, known for the miracles performed by Jesus Christ),⁵ not far from Nazareth. An otherwise unobtrusive township, 75 percent Muslim and 25 percent Christian, this is where another young, talented and charismatic young Islamist leader, Sheikh Kamal Khatib, made his debut. In the 1989 elections, the sheikh ran in the elections and got a plurality of the vote (38 percent), but as a second round was needed to win a majority, he was defeated by a coalition of his opponents. Nevertheless, his Islamic List won one-third of the seats in the town council (6 out of 18), much to the displeasure of the local Christians who joined with the others to defeat him.⁶

In neighboring Nazareth, the largest Arab city in Israel, the Islamists' show was less

spectacular, mostly due to the grip that the vastly popular Tufiq Ziad had on local politics. There too an Islamist, ‘Umar Shararah, ran for elections as a candidate for the Islamic Movement; but, unlike his Kafr Kanna neighbor he had no record of working on welfare undertakings and services for his city. In Nazareth, it was Ziad’s Communists and the local churches who were running the summer camps and the educational and charitable organizations in the city. Nevertheless, Shararah picked up the majority of the vote in the Muslim neighborhoods, and the absolute majority of all Muslims who participated in the 1989 vote. Tufiq Ziad, the head of the Communist-Hadash List, the incumbent Mayor, was re-elected in a test of his personal popularity. Perhaps only the fact that he was Muslim, though not an observant one, permitted his victory in that atmosphere of Islamic euphoria. In 1984 he had won handsomely by 70 percent of the vote; but now only the increasing strength of the communist vote in the Christian neighborhoods – an apparent reaction to the menacing ascendancy of the Islamic Movement – allowed Ziad to be re-elected for his fourth term.

What happened in Kafr Kanna and Nazareth heralded the political break between the Muslim and Christian communities in mixed towns and villages, the former rallying around the Muslim Movement with the latter closing ranks, in self-defense, around the communists. But that was not to last due to the decline in the communist appeal after the demise of communism elsewhere. Henceforth, the Christians would face other choices, such as lending their support to all-Israeli parties rather than succumbing to the pressures of the Muslim fundamentalists. During the 1989 elections the Islamists attempted to convince the Christians to join them, employing anti-communist arguments, and suggesting that Christian candidates might appeal to Muslim fundamentalist Lists. But the Christians elected to form coalitions with other political parties which for the time being brought the Muslim candidates to a standstill. However, the Christians recognized the danger signs. They still constituted the majority in eight towns and villages, and the minority in eight others, including Nazareth and Kafr Kanna, and they had to find a way of keeping their identity from being inundated by the new waves of Islamism. All the more so since Nazareth and Kafr Kanna had been both fundamentally Christian places, with holy places and houses of prayer and institutions harking back to the life of Jesus and to the history of the Church in the Holy Land.

The victory of the Muslim fundamentalists in the local elections of 1989, coupled with the continuation of the Intifadah which had broken out in 1987 and in which the Hamas Muslim fundamentalists had been playing a leading role, certainly strengthened the hands of the adepts in the Muslim Movement in Israel. The shrieking anti-Jewish, anti-Zionist and anti-Israeli propaganda of the Islamic Movement⁷ by necessity spilled over to the Christian Arabs, even those who championed most vociferously the Arab and Palestinian causes. In fact Muslim fundamentalists in Israel are no different from their coreligionists elsewhere who accuse Christianity and the Christian world of pursuing their onslaughts, especially religious and cultural, against the Islamic world in order to undermine it and corrupt its youth. Sheikh Khatib of Kafr Kanna, wrote thus:

My words may sound harsh to proponents of Arab nationalism who regard the solution of the problem in national terms, while I regard it in Islamic, and only in Islamic, terms ... Jerusalem and Palestine, which had warmly embraced ‘Umar [ibn al-Khattab], Khaled [ibn al-Walid], Abu ‘Ubaydah and Saladin, cannot embrace [Archbishop] Capucci or George [Habash], because she is a loyal spouse ... The absence of her true spouse does not mean that he died ... He will return with passion and longing.⁸

In other articles in *Al-Sirat*, Hanna Seniora, one of the spokesmen for Palestinian nationalism on the West Bank, was charged with having warned America against the rise of Islamic

fundamentalism and of having maintained contacts with personalities in the 'Jewish Entity'. It was also claimed that the 'new Crusade' in Palestine had been fostered by people like Butrus Ghali, a Copt, then Minister of State for Foreign Affairs in Egypt and later the Secretary General of the UN, and Clovis Maqsud, a Christian and delegate of the Arab League to the UN, who 'pretended to speak in the name of the Muslims.'⁹

Al-Sirat, the main mouthpiece of the Islamic Movement in those years, spread its revivalist messages on matters ranging from returning to the faith, women and youth, to matters of state, Jihad and incitement against Jews and Christians alike. It soon split into a monthly and a weekly publication and became the main platform for support of the Palestinians in the territories. At the end of 1989 it was closed by the authorities due to its abusive language against the Jews, which went as far as the denial of the Holocaust. It was immediately supplanted by the new *Sawt al-Haqq wal-Huriyya* (The Voice of Truth and Liberty), also a weekly. But the Islamic Movement also expounded its positions and publicized its views in posters, leaflets, and audio and video tapes which became very popular among the young. The movement could look with pride on its achievements in a relatively short period of time and divide up its history as follows:

1. The period of infancy, referring to the 1979-80 *Usrat-al-Jihad* venture which ended with disaster when most members of the group found themselves in jail.
2. The age of maturity beginning in 1983, when the movement based itself on local voluntary associations which operated within the confines of the law, especially in extending religious and welfare services.
3. When the movement came of age in 1989 and established itself as the leading and the fastest growing political force among Israeli Arabs, with mayors and city councilmen exercising actual power in many towns and villages.

If they were to continue in this vein, the Muslim fundamentalists would probably mark 1991 as the beginning of the split in their ranks. That year saw deep divisions among the Arabs in Israel as a result of the peace process sponsored by the US following Saddam's defeat in the second Gulf War. Most Arab parties in Israel, together with the moderate followers of the Islamic Movement were in favor of that *démarche*, while the more doctrinal section of the Movement was opposed to it.¹⁰ In consequence, the pragmatists headed by Sheikh Abdallah were in favor of participating in the 1992 elections in Israel, but the more extremist minority continued to oppose partaking in the Israeli political system as this would imply recognition of the Jewish-Zionist political entity. The ideological stakes are enormous. For, unlike the local elections in which the Islamic Movement came to take up several mayoralities, thus contributing to self-reliance and to reinforcing the trend of separateness from the Israeli mainstream, running for national elections would entail three major doctrinal breaches:

1. Participation would mean an acceptance of the rule of the non-Muslim majority.
2. Respect for the laws of Israel, which every elected member of the Knesset states in his inaugural oath, would mean positing Israeli law over the Islamic Shari'a.
3. The sovereignty of Israel would then be implicitly recognized over lands that the Muslims consider *Waqf*.

The elections of 1992, in which for the first time more Arabs voted for general Israeli parties

than for specifically Arab Lists, also signaled the sharp decline in the communists' appeal all over the country. Since the Islamists did not participate in the vote on the one hand, and the percentage of voters among the Arabs shrunk from about 73 percent in the previous elections in 1988 to about 70 percent this time on the other,¹¹ one could speculate that Islamists who shunned participation in the elections continued to abstain from voting. Tufiq Zyad of Nazareth was re-elected to the Knesset, this time as the head of the Hadash List, and his party got about 50 percent of the local vote (9,448 out of a total of 21,000) in spite of the losses suffered generally by his party both locally and countrywide.¹² These and other processes came to full maturity in the local elections of 1993:

- Unlike the national elections a year earlier where only 70 percent of the Arab voters went to the polls, 90 percent of the Arabs participated in their local elections; evidence enough of their emphasis on supporting their local authorities through which they could vent their concerns.
- The Hadash Party continued to lead in local Arab politics, in spite of its sharp losses in the national elections: this time, the party won only 12 mayorships compared with 15 in 1989, but in Nazareth it registered gains, mainly due to Zyad's stature.
- The Islamic Movement maintained its strength, that is, 5 mayorships and 50 councilmen in local councils.¹³

However, the Christians of Israel in general, and those of Nazareth in particular, could not help but see the writing on the wall: their political status was slipping, and the rise of the Islamic fundamentalists began to pose a direct threat to them. This led to a loss of self-confidence in their future as a minority within the (Arab) minority in the country. Even though the more moderate elements within the Islamic Movement in Israel herald the 'links of fraternity between Muslim and Christian Arabs', the Christians know what awaits them as *dhimmi*s if an Islamic state ruled by Shari'a law were to materialize in Palestine. In 1992, the organ of the Islamic Movement, *Sawt al-Haqq wal-Huriyya*, carried an outright attack on a respected Christian journalist, Atallah Mansur, for a series of articles he had published criticizing the moral conduct of some Islamist leaders. He was accused of harming Islam, diffusing lies, and hurting the integrity of Muslim fundamentalists and Muslim women. He was condemned as a racist and as a warmonger who sowed discord among the Arabs of Israel. Mansur sued in a court of law and was compensated for the libel, but Christians in general continue to feel that the State of Israel ought, as a democratic state, to prohibit by law such incitement against them.¹⁴ They simply ignored, or were not aware of, similar broadsides launched against the Jews which went unpunished by the authorities.¹⁵

Attacks against and condemnation of Christians are also often heard in mosques, in sermons and in publications of the Muslim Movement. On the eve of the Al-Ad'ha Festival in 1996, a leaflet was distributed in Umm al-Fahm, which accused local youth of improper behavior "mimicking that of Jewish and Christian Unbelievers". The manifesto reached Nazareth and caused outrage there, which was reflected in the local press – which is owned and edited by Christians – such as *Al-Sinara* and *Kul-al-'Arab*.¹⁶ In response, the Christians, far from counter-attacking, reacted like a *dhimmi* people, who sing the praise of the ruler as they are being beaten by him.¹⁷ They protested that they were as Arab as all the others, and they pointed out their contributions to Arab culture and history, something that only encouraged more onslaughts upon

them.

In June 1996, an Arab-Christian scholar conducted a survey among high school students in Nazareth as part of his thesis in psychology, on the question of the identity of the Christians in Israel. The questionnaire that he circulated among the students in the Baptist school in Nazareth, and which had been filled in by other Christians in other towns in Israel without a hitch, now occasioned a storm that could neither have been foreseen nor justified and was widely echoed in the Arab and national media in the country, including the Islamic *Sawt al-Haqq*. Again in a sycophant fashion worthy of *dhimmi*, even the Christian writers who tried to fend off the Muslim (and some Christian) attacks on that unfortunate scholar whose only sin was the search of scientific truth, heaped blame on their coreligionist. He was accused of ‘sowing the poison of racism and division between the Arab Christians and Arab Muslims’. The school authorities were also blamed for permitting the circulation of the questionnaire.¹⁸

Another case in point was a conflict around land ownership in Nazareth, which was to become the antecedent of the much larger dispute which was to erupt into the open in 1997-99. During the years when Zyad was mayor, a mosque was built without the required city permit on the location of the tomb of a local Muslim saint, Nabi Sa'in; this dominates the city from the surrounding heights, in close proximity to a Christian monastery. The illegal construction of the mosque later received a *post-factum* permit, when the city leaders realized that their intervention would mean a clash with the Muslim majority. The growing Muslim Movement in the town later claimed that the adjoining terrain, covering an area of 213 dunam, was a *Waqf* land; while the municipality confirmed its ownership of the grounds. This issue became a bone of contention between Christians and Muslims, and the Islamic mouthpiece *Sawt-al-Haqq* devoted an entire article to it (22 November 1996). The local Christians feared that the Muslim claims, which were followed by acts of encroachment upon properties that were not Muslim under the pretext of their being *Waqf* land, were a stratagem by Muslims to take over the erstwhile Christian city of Nazareth.¹⁹ Conversely, this Muslim success was evidence enough that neither the Christian minority nor the Israeli authorities were capable of challenging the Muslim Movement; the former due to their fear of further increasing the Muslims' wrath and their inability to arrest the process, the latter due to their unwillingness to clash with the Muslims of Israel in general.

The Schism

On the eve of the 1996 national elections in Israel, the question of the Muslim Movement's participation once again came to the fore, coupled with other issues of contention and personal ambition. Most of the membership, together with the organs of the group, controlled by Sheikh Abdallah, overwhelmingly supported the resolution to run for the Knesset. But Sheikh Ra'id and his fellow radicals like Kamal Khatib from Kafr Kanna, rejected this resolution and – taking advantage of Abdallah's absence abroad – published a communiqué which stated that the resolution did not apply to them. Many attempts to reconcile the two contending parties were made, but in vain. Then, Ra'id gathered his forces and declared the establishment of his own 'Islamic Movement', an identical appellation to that of the mother movement, but evidently much more radical. Or, is it indeed?

At first sight it seems that the segregated environment that the Islamic Movement in general has been creating around its constituencies in Israel is, by definition, a temporary step. With

regard to the long-term solution to their plight, the Islamic Movement entertains in its midst various points of view, only some of which have led to open rifts and then schism. Some of the views expressed are ambiguous, and sometimes there are even explicit statements of the need for coexistence with and within the Jewish state or with the Christian minority therein. Others amount to veiled or even open threats of revolt, and visions of establishing a Muslim state over all Palestine, where both the Jews and the Christians would be *dhimmi*s; something clearly echoed in the Hamas Charter²⁰ which is a source of inspiration to the radicals in the Movement. To the pragmatists this sort of coexistence permits their movement to organize, to participate in the elections (local and national), to inculcate its norms into its constituencies, to champion Islamic causes, and at the same time to maintain Muslim segregation and to implement their agenda. By exploiting the means afforded to them by open and democratic Israel, they are willing to play by the rules of democracy as long as their purposes are served. Ultimately, at some undefined future point, they entertain the hope of replacing the existing system by a new Islamic order. Those among them who speak about an Islamic state in Palestine seldom specify its boundaries, or the circumstances under which it may come into being, leaving open the possibility that it might encompass the entire territory, including Israel, which in any case is considered a *Waqf* land by them.

The pragmatists specifically prescribe a Palestinian state alongside Israel and accept the Oslo process.²¹ But, when asked, they claim that if this materialized they would elect to continue to dwell in Israel rather than in the Palestinian state, as they realize that they are much freer and better off than they would be in any Arab country. In most Arab countries indeed, including the 'liberal', 'democratic' and 'moderate' among them – such as Jordan and Egypt – specifically Islamic parties cannot run for elections while in Israel they can and do. At any rate, an element of Palestinian nationalism is implicit in their demand for a Palestinian state, although the Islamic Movement, in Israel and elsewhere, negates nationalism as a matter of principle and views the ultimate solution as a merging into the future Caliphate of the united Umma of Islam. However, in Israel, 'nationalism' for the Arab minority does not mean an Israeli-Jewish identity, but an Arab-Palestinian identity, thereby raising the unresolved contradictions of identity discussed above.

Sheikh Abdallah, the founder and leader of the Movement, has distanced himself in recent years from the daily management of the group, but he continues to command the respect of his followers as their supreme spiritual guide. But, after the split in the Movement, his political stature was undermined by his radical rivals. His town of Kafr Qassem, as well as neighboring Kafr Bara, the Bedouins of the Negev, the towns of Jaljulya and Kafr Qara, and the mixed cities of Jaffa, Acre, Lod, Ramleh and Nazareth can be counted among his constituencies. Among his supporters are also included the two Knesset members which represent the party, one from Kafr Kanna and the other from Jaljulia, as well as the member of the City Council of Nazareth, Salman Abu-Ahmed, who will play a central role in the dispute between Christians and Muslims in the city. On the other hand, the more radical group, led by Sheikh Ra'id, enjoys the support of Umm al-Fahm of which Ra'id is the mayor and the adulated hero, some satellite villages around his town, and part of Kafr Kanna under his fellow-radical, Kamal Khatib.

Nothing is more indicative of the thinking and ambitions of the two groups than their respective *modus operandi*. Sheikh Abdallah focuses on parliamentary activities via the Movement's Knesset members, and tirelessly labors for *rapprochement* between Arabs and Jews in Israel. He also mediates in local rifts and conflicts among Israeli Arabs, and has won a reputation as a man of peace and reconciliation. He was, however, crippled by the schism as the

two leading young and promising talents – Ra'id and Khatib – were left out, and he was deprived of the hub of the Movement that was Umm-al-Fahm, where the printing house, the editorial set-up of *Sawt-al-Haqq*, the Islamic College, the Islamic Sports Association, the Zakat Board, etc., were located. He had to set up his own parallel organizations, in order to make up for the lost ones, and founded a new journal – *Al-Mithaq* (The Covenant) – which, unlike *Sawt-al-Haqq*, reflects the new directions of the parliamentary activities of the Movement in collaboration with the Israeli establishment. The group led by Rai'd took over all the institutions based in Umm-all-Fahm, from which he pursues his brand of activism outside the establishment and often in collision with it.

First, the radicals undertook to restore to Islamic tenure, and to refurbish physically, old *Waqf* assets and Muslim holy places, especially the destroyed mosques and cemeteries in the multitude of Arab villages that had been ravaged and abandoned during the 1948 War, and which no one had cared to tend to. This is particularly significant given the mood prevailing among Israeli Arabs of commemorating their *Nakbah* of the loss of Palestine, at the same time that the Israelis celebrate their Jubilee or their annual Independence Day. The signal is clear: while other Arabs commemorate, parade, demonstrate or lament their recent history, the radical group is bent on rehabilitating, constructing, claiming ownership, and taking the lead in reclaiming their patrimony. They scan and monitor all Israeli national construction projects, such as roads and infrastructure, in order to stage physical opposition and raise levels of awareness among Arabs in Israel, rhetorically, against any attempt to run over or desecrate what they consider as a religious site. A case in point is the Istiqlal cemetery near Haifa, where the Islamic hero of the 1930s, Izz-a-Din al-Qassam, was buried after he was killed in battle against the British in 1935. This old burial ground had been neglected and forgotten for decades, until it regained prominence when the Hamas called its military arm The Qassam Fighters'. When the municipality planned to widen the highway on the fringe of the cemetery, the Islamists put up a round-the-clock watch on the newly spruced-up tomb and advised the authorities that they would prevent any attempt to encroach on these grounds.

The Movement also strives to restore to Islamic control old mosques which had been either destroyed or turned into entertainment, tourist, commercial and other uses; and they demand that the revenues from the *Waqf* assets in the country be put under their direct management. Their activities are so well publicized that they have won acclaim from the Muslims of Israel and elsewhere. So much so, that other Muslims from the more moderate wing have adopted the technique of reclaiming, or simply taking over, any piece of property they covet that may or may not have been linked in the past to Islamic ownership. They declare it *Waqf* or a holy place, and squat on it until the authorities give in in order 'to avoid bloodshed'. This pattern has been followed by the Muslims of Nazareth who, for the most part, adhere to the more moderate faction of Sheikh Abdallah; but, in matters of *Waqf* and taking over properties that are not theirs, they act just like the radicals. This raises several questions:

- Are there really 'moderates' and 'radicals' among these Muslim fundamentalists; or is it simply a matter of opportunism, tactics and strategy as regards what are the best and most peaceful means for attaining the Islamic goals shared by both wings of the Movement?
- Where was the 'moderate' Sheikh Abdallah – the famous mediator and intermediary, the man of peace and reconciliation, to whose directives the Nazareth Islamists yield – when the Muslims violently, and repeatedly, invaded public property in the city and claimed it was *Waqf*? Where was he when the Islamists triggered the crisis between Christians and

Muslims in Nazareth on Christmas Eve of 1997, which is the topic of this book?

- Does not the pattern of action of the Islamists in Nazareth and elsewhere suggest a common strategy shared by all fundamentalists – of expanding at the expense of their Jewish and Christian neighbors under the nebulous pretext of ‘holy places’; encouraged by the less-than-assertive response of the Israeli authorities?

The radicals use also other themes to mobilize and increase their grassroot support in Israel and international Islamic backing for their activities of reclaiming their patrimony – foremost of which is Jerusalem in general, and the Aqsa Mosque in particular. When the Islamic Movement was united under ‘moderate’ Sheikh Abdallah, *Sawt-al-Haqq* annually blamed the Israeli authorities for the arson by an Australian Christian tourist of the Aqsa Mosque in 1969. Since the split in the Movement, it has been principally the radical group which has taken on the responsibility for that campaign against Israel, as part of its usual sustained charges against it; and it is Sheikh Ra’id who has become personally the standard bearer of the struggle for Arab and Islamic Jerusalem. He warns against the ‘impending menace to Al-Aqsa’, and attempts to rally Islamic public opinion around him in order to ‘rescue’ the mosque. He virulently condemns the Israeli excavations around the site and has invited Muslim delegations from Israel and Islamic countries to come and see for themselves the works that are calculated – in his opinion – to undermine the foundations of that holy shrine in the Temple Mount compound.

To counter the perceived Israeli threat, Ra’id initiated the take-over and refurbishing of the underground floor of the Mosque called by Israelis the ‘Solomon Stables’ and by Muslims ‘al-Musallah al-Marwani’,²² thus adding more space for worshippers during the peak flow in high holidays, like Ramadan. To take over a place and call it a *musallah* (a place of prayer which was not initially built as a mosque by and in itself), will become the pattern for Islamists in Nazareth and elsewhere, as a method of claiming that a site is a holy place or a *Waqf* asset and then claiming rights of ownership over it. Ra’id also initiated a gathering of Islamists in Israel in which he lamented the state of the Aqsa site under ‘Jewish occupation’, and ran a Jerusalem Festival for the same purpose which attracted some 40,000 believers. All the activities which followed the controversial opening by Israel of the Hamonean tunnel next to the Temple Mount, won support for the Sheikh from Muslim Brothers everywhere. For he is rightly perceived as a man of vision and action, and of unswerving commitment to the Islamic cause. Indeed, his record shows that already in 1992 he had gathered and organized food contributions for the 415 Hamas leaders who had been banned by Israel from entering Lebanese territory.

Sheikh Ra’id often travels to Islamic countries, especially Egypt and Turkey. The latter was at the top of his preoccupations and hopes during the brief tenure of the Arbakan government in the 1990s, which championed world Islamic causes in the name of Arbakan’s ruling Welfare Party in Ankara. He sought recognition for his Islamic College by Turkish Muslim authorities and also maintained relationships with the political branch of Hamas. When Sheikh Yassin, the founder and leader of that group, was jailed in Israel during the 1990s, he built up a close partnership with Dr a-Zahar, one of the top leaders of the movement in Gaza; and after Yassin was released in late 1997, he edged closer to him. His supportive activities for the Hamas – which have apparently also included material aid to the families of the Islamikaze²³ and subventions to the needy – have won him much scorn from the Israeli authorities and public opinion alike, but much praise and adulation from Islamists and their sympathizers in Israel, the Palestinian Authority and the rest of the militant Islamic world.

The Islamists Role in Israeli Politics

The two splinter groups of the Islamic Movement in Israel have become so deeply entrenched in the landscape of the country, that they are likely to maintain their separate institutions, their mutual bickering and ideological differences – which are mainly a question of nuances and tactics, not of doctrine and long-term strategy Abdallah's group may grow on the national level due to its participation in national politics through its Knesset members, and the likelihood of him providing a better and more modern leadership than the worn out communists. Ra'id's faction, which is stronger on the local level, may pursue its policy of playing on the frustrations of the young Arabs in Israel who cannot identify with the Israeli establishment while they continue to tap its grants and services, and who are happy with the growing segregation of their Islamic enclaves from the Israeli mainstream. Both have enough cadres, vested interest, institutions, choice leaders and popular support to last. In the general atmosphere among Israeli Arabs – of dissatisfaction with, and alienation from, the Israeli polity which has failed to date to settle the contradictions between its nature as a Jewish-Zionist state and its democratic aspiration for equal rights and duties to all its citizenry – the prognosis cannot be optimistic.

Admittedly, the processes that the Arab population in Israel has been undergoing are complicated and diversified, and no blanket statement can be justly applied to embrace all of them. For while Israelization is proceeding apace as regards the internalizing values of democracy, human rights, freedom of speech, higher standards of living, consumers' rights, high technology, education, and substituting meritocratic and personal politics for the old machinations of the traditional patriarchal hierarchies, elements of alienation, Islamization and Arab nationalism are also noticeable. Spurred on by the general success story of Islamic fundamentalism in the world today, it is conceivable that many more Muslims in Israel will regroup around their religio-cultural heritage in the years to come. If they do so and – regardless of the Islamic faction they will elect to follow – if by then the moderates and the radicals have not merged again, their common doctrinal and cultural heritage, and the joint ideological infrastructure they have cultivated over the years, will provide them with a common denominator to rally around. This common denominator is made up of two components: one negative regarding the Jews and Christians among whom they live, the other positive, reflecting their vision of the future Islamic state they want to achieve.

The first element is rationalized and reinforced in the writings of some fundamentalist writers, such as Sayyed Qut'b, already mentioned above, who is adulated by the two rival groups alike. He has built upon other Islamists' accusations and condemnations of Jews and Christians to such a degree as to turn them from a repository of irrational hatred into a rational and systematic 'scientific' discourse. He did so in the process of 'proving' that the only divine truth left to mankind was Islam, while all the others, including Christianity and Judaism, were repositories of falsehood and distortion. Therefore Islam, as the only truth, must reprise its role of universal leadership in order to liberate mankind from its errors. Moreover, Jews and Christians being the purveyors of false revelations were for that reason insidious to Islam, as the current 'Judeo-Christian conspiracy' proves.²⁴ The outcome flows evidently from these hallowed assumptions shared by Muslim fundamentalists: not only are Jews and Christians detested in their own right, but being the long arms of the West in the Islamic world, they are considered as its agents in its endeavor to undermine Islam, corrupt it from within, alienate its youth by their permissiveness and immoral conduct, and penetrate its educational systems in order to destroy them, etc.²⁵

Hence, the attempt made by the Islamists of both convictions in Israel to displace the Christians in local government and reclaim from them the positions of influence which Christians had gained in Arab political parties, city councils, media, educational systems and national institutions. Moreover, as the literature on political violence has shown, rhetorical delegitimization of the rival or the enemy is the first step towards making him a free prey for all. If the Jew cannot be defeated at this point, then it becomes imperative to separate oneself off from him. Or, in a process known by psychologists as ‘displaced aggression’, the weak Christians in Israel are attacked while stronger Jews are avoided, although the Jews are the indirect target. This process is not unlike what happened in Lebanon, where the frustrated Palestinians in the 1970s joined with their Islamic coreligionists to strike first at the ‘People of Sunday’, as long as the ‘People of Saturday’ proved too recalcitrant.²⁶ Victory over one of them, now or in some undetermined future, might bring the Islamists one step closer to realizing their vision of the Islamic state. Back in 1989, the mouthpiece of the united Islamic Movement spoke loudly and clearly:

Our programme has clear stages and well-defined steps. We know what we want and we know how to get there ... Our goal is the Muslim people and the Muslim person, therefore we act so that our message could get everywhere to every home. We want the banner of Allah to flutter again proudly over the lands that used to constitute Islamdom at any time in the past, and where the voice of the *mu’azzin* could be heard praising Allah ... We want our call to reach everywhere and to be heard by all people of the universe. Everyone of our stages has its means and ramifications, but we are reluctant at this point to elaborate any more.²⁷

Within the democratic system of Israel one has a limitless freedom of expression; one can incite, libel, scorn and calumniate entire communities and groups, with impunity. Theoretically, incitement and libel can bring indictment and prosecution, but the State of Israel has usually refrained from pursuing this course and always elected to avoid scandals and sensations which might generate conflict and friction within the delicate inter-communal balance. Only personal cases of libel can be settled in court via civil suits which take for ever to reach judgement and verdict. Therefore, the Islamists have learned to skate with extreme care to the farthest limits of legality, and prudently skirting anything that might become a matter of criminal justice. Nevertheless, the rate of criminality among Israeli Arabs is about double that of the general population, and a large part of it is ‘ideological’,²⁸ namely acts of violence or sabotage carried out particularly by Islamists (or other Arabs) not for personal gain but for the purpose of harming the state of Israel or scaring off their Jewish or Christian neighbors.

However, the regular and customary means for the Islamists to attain their ends – especially in the case of the realistic Sheikh ‘Abdallah’s moderates who have accepted the Oslo peace process, is to play by the rules of Israeli society and pursue their goals through the ballots, not with bullets. Therefore, beyond the national elections where the Islamists have gained their two parliamentary seats, in conjunction with another Arab faction so as not be accused of running an Islamic Party under the aegis of the Jewish state, the Islamists focus on local elections in Arab towns and villages to show their strength. In the local elections of 1998 both splinter groups of the Islamic Movement sharpened their messages and modernized their views. Sheikh Ra’id rejected the Wye Agreement due to what he considered to be the too frequent concessions extracted from the Palestinians, and he also virulently opposed the subsequent abrogation of the Palestinian National Charter that the Israelis demanded as an indispensable condition for implementing this Agreement. Sheikh ‘Abdallah on the other hand, supported both *démarches*. The end result is that the two groups have in fact aligned themselves along the Hamas-Palestinian Authority divide.

The line-up of the moderates and radicals following the 1998 local elections showed mixed results: Sheikh Ra'id ran again for the third time in Umm-al-Fahm and received 70 percent of the vote, and his party conquered 7 out of the 11 seats in the City Council; Salman abu-Ahmed of Nazareth, who is identified with the Sheikh Abdallah faction, lost the mayoral elections but gained control of 10 out of the 19 seats on the city council. However, other candidates from the moderate group won the mayoralties in several other villages, while others lost. At least in the case of Nazareth this shows that primacy was given to the experienced and popular incumbent Christian mayor, Jeraysi, while the inexperienced and less well-known head of the Islamic Movement lost the mayoralty but gained the city council. This deadlock between the mayor and the majority of the city council, which is at the root of the Nazareth impasse discussed below, nevertheless signals the fact that the rule of the city has finally passed into Muslim hands, and that Mayor Jeraysi who was elected for his skill, not for his Christianity, will probably go down in history as the last Christian mayor of that erstwhile Christian city. The communists sustained a severe blow in the national elections of 1999, when their vote among Arabs went down from 37 percent in 1996 to 22 percent in these elections, and they gained only three Knesset seats; while the Islamist-led United Arab List gained five seats, which made it the largest Arab faction in the Knesset. These results may well indicate that this trend will continue.

Notes

- 1 Raphael Israeli, 'Muslim Fundamentalists as Social Revolutionaries', *Journal of Terrorism and Political Violence*, 6, 4 (1994), pp. 462-5.
- 2 See, for example, Sayyid Qutb, *Our War Against the Jews*, often quoted by Muslim fundamentalists everywhere. See also *The New East*, 22 (1989) [Hebrew]; a special issue on 'The Arabs of Israel Between Religious Revival and National Awakening'.
- 3 For the entire story, see Thomas Mayer, *The Muslim Awakening in Israel* (Nazareth, 1986) [Arabic].
- 4 For details of the Islamic movement and its history in the 1980s, see Raphael Israeli, *Muslim Fundamentalism in Israel* (London: Brassey's, 1993).
- 5 For the miracle of turning water into wine, see John 2:1-11. For the miracle of the cure of a child, see John 4:44-54.
- 6 For the entire story of Sheikh Khatib and Kafr Kanna, see Israeli, *Muslim Fundamentalism*.
- 7 Ibid., especially [Chs 2](#), 5 and 6.
- 8 *Al-Sirat*, 7 November (1987), pp. 10-13.
- 9 Ibid., pp. 20-3.
- 10 See As'ad Ghanem, 'The Arabs in Israel on the Eve of the Elections for the Thirteenth Knesset', *Survey of Arab Affairs*, 8 (1992), pp. 1-3.
- 11 Sarah Ozacky-Lazar, 'The Elections to the Thirteenth Knesset Among the Arabs in Israel', *Survey of Arab Affairs*, 9 (1992), pp. 1-39.
- 12 Ibid., see the table on p. 21.
- 13 As'ad Ghanem and Sarah Ozacky-Lazar, 'The Local Elections in the Arab Councils, November 1993: Results and Analysis', *Survey of Arab Affairs*, 13 (1994).
- 14 See Daphne Tsimhoni, 'Christians in Israel: Between Religion and Politics', in E. Rekhess (ed.), *The Arabs in Israeli Politics: Dilemmas of Identity* (1998), pp. 66-7.
- 15 See Israeli, *Muslim Fundamentalism*; especially pp. 38-48.
- 16 Ibid., p. 67.
- 17 For the legal, political and psychological underpinnings of the *dhimmi* condition, see Bat Ye'or, *The Dhimmi*, especially [Chs 6](#) and 7; also, *Decline of Eastern Christianity*, especially [Ch. 9](#).

18 Ibid., p. 68.

19 Ibid.

20 See Article XXXI of the Hamas Charter, in Israeli, 'The Charter of Allah', p. 125.

21 Rekhess, *Arabs in Israeli Politics*, p. 74.

22 The Prayer Place of Marwan, one of the Umayyad caliphs.

23 This term was coined by Raphael Israeli to designate the so-called 'suicide bombers'. For the detailed elaboration on this matter, see Raphael Israeli, 'Islamikaze and their Significance', *Journal of Terrorism and Political Violence*, 9, 3 (1997), pp. 96-121.

24 See Qut'b, *Our War Against the Jews*.

25 All these themes are echoed in the Platform of the Hamas cited above and in the writings of Muslim fundamentalists in Israel and elsewhere.

26 See Bernhard Lewis, 'The Return of Islam', *Commentary*, 61,1 (January 1976), pp. 39-49.

27 *Sawt al-Haqq wal-Huriyya*, 29 December (1989).

28 Raphael Israeli, 'The Arabs in Israel: Criminality, Identity and the Peace Process', *Journal of Terrorism and Political Violence*, 10 (Spring 1998), pp. 39-59.

6.

Nazareth 2000

In the mid-1990s, during the lifetime of Tufiq Zyad – who was incidentally married to a Christian wife – the idea was mooted that towards the end of the century and the beginning of the new millennium, a wide-range program of developing the city ought to be undertaken. Zyad seemed ideally suited for the task due to the public weight he carried in his city, and his double concern for the millennium and for the role that his city ought to play in it. Moreover, with his able Christian deputy, Ramiz Jeraysi, at his side, he was sure to combine the forces of the mixed population of the city with massive governmental aid, in order to turn the occasion into a watershed for Nazareth's central position and significance in international tourism.

In 1994 the number of tourists who visited the city was estimated at 850,000 (out of the total figure of two million); but their stay was limited to a few hours only – the time to visit holy places and enjoy some local dishes – and then they went off to other sites. The net result was that Nazareth, with its tremendous touristic potential, did not benefit economically from the pilgrims and about two-thirds of its population continued to seek employment outside the city.¹ 'Nazareth 2000' was to revolutionize all that, under the assumption that after the completion of the peace treaties between Israel on the one hand, and Jordan and Egypt on the other, and following the Oslo process with the Palestinians, tourists and pilgrims who were hitherto concerned about their personal safety would find comfort in the new atmosphere of peace and flock in their millions to the Middle East in general, and to Israel – including Nazareth – in particular. These numbers could only increase by reason of the millennium. The feeling was that if Jerusalem could attract so many pilgrims as to create the famous 'Jerusalem Syndrome', a spruced-up Nazareth with massive new facilities and accommodations would be able to match it.

Outline of the Project

The last urban plan of the city had been approved by the Mandatary Power in 1942, and for want of any alternative plan ever since, Nazareth's sprawling expansion had happened in what urban planners call a 'planning vacuum', and construction erupted spontaneously wherever one could or would build, both for public and for private uses. Infrastructure was practically non-existent, since the roads, alleys, water, sewerage, electricity and telephone systems that had been devised for a small town in 1942 could not accommodate a population that had grown significantly. And the municipality was too poor and too busy with either internal bickering or with ideological matters of high politics during Zyad's tenure, to turn its attention and lend top priority to development on a massive scale. The successive governments of Israel were not inclined to invest public funds in the city either, due to the radical, often anti-Israeli views voiced by its

leaders – notably Zyad – but also the heads of churches, and practically all Arab factions that were represented and found expression in the Arab political hub that was Nazareth.

But in the mid-1990s a radical change occurred, particularly under the national project, ‘The 1997 Turnaround’, whereby Israeli governmental agencies began investing in Nazareth: the Ministry of Transport undertook the improvement of roads, other agencies harnessed funds to replace the decaying infrastructures, and the Tourist Corporation, the Ministry of Tourism and the Municipality of Nazareth came to a common decision to turn the city into a modern, lively and attractive place in which it is pleasant to live and conduct business, and to visit and spend time. The occasion of the upcoming millennium was not only a ‘pretext’, but a truly mobilizing factor that the planners were sure would generate enthusiasm in all sections of the city population and would encourage the business community to harness its funds, social influence and organizational skills to implement this grandiose vision. The idea was that since the entire city was bound to gain economically, and in terms of the city’s stature and reputation, from the envisaged upturn in the course of events, all other communal, tribal and political considerations would be dwarfed and set aside. Except that no one could foresee that politics, especially when interwoven with religion, personal interest and inter-communal competition, would produce a powerful fabric of tension, hatred and violence that would poison the atmosphere and lead to irrational behavior.

The plan focused on the Old City kernel of Nazareth with its many holy sites designed for massive visits of pilgrims, and its exciting and busy market, with its multitude of alleys and ancient construction which make the city a fairytale Middle Eastern site, situated in the heart of the hilly biblical land of the Galilee. The idea was that during the years 1995-99, in preparation for the pivotal year 2000, enough facilities would be ready to host 2.1 million tourists whose aggregate stay would amount to 3.9 million days.² The assumption was that such a number of tourist days, if attained, would stabilize around that level beyond the year 2000 and for many years to come. That meant that economic life in the city would be revolutionized and tourism would become its main source of employment, business and wealth. The immediate problem, then, was how to bridge the gap between the urban chaos that Nazareth had become due to unchecked private and communal construction to the detriment of public welfare, and the needs of the city if and when the optimistic projections for 2000 were to materialize. Thus, the detailed plan, drawn up by the Ministry of Tourism and the Tourism Corporation, aimed first of all at developing the infrastructure to the highest international standards commensurate with the projected new ambiance in town. Then, emphasis would be put on developing the holy sites and their environment, to expand the main arteries of transport so as to solve the acute traffic and parking problems, and to devise promenades and entire itineraries of walks and hiking so as to prolong the stay of tourists in town.

If done, all that would automatically increase spending by tourists in the city’s sites, stores, cafés, restaurants and souvenir shops, and provide tourism-oriented employment to thousands of Nazarenes. Not only would that prepare the city for 2000, but it would also contribute to Israel’s national economy. Thus, detailed plans were prepared for a ringroad on the heights overlooking Nazareth together with road segments that would connect it to its refurbished sites and to the city center. The overall plan was divided into a number of projects whose feasibility, planning and execution were seen as laying around the corner. The major projects were to have included:

- The City Square. Geared to create a large and open space at the foot of the central tourist

and pilgrim attraction – the Basilica of the Annunciation – where tourists and locals could mingle in the enjoyment of the city’s enhanced beauty and in the sharing of its sites, tales and scents. Around that square many tourist-oriented shops were to be built, together with other tourist attractions. In short, the Square was to become the linchpin of tourism in the city, its show-window, its meeting place of faiths, nationalities, cultures, communities and passers-by, in the spirit of peace and harmony which Nazareth had always inspired, and which the creators of the grand plan of 2000 wished to preserve.

- The St Mary’s Well Complex. This was to include the erection of another, smaller, city square around the St Gabriel Orthodox Church of the Annunciation, for the exclusive use of pedestrians around the church and the Holy Well sites.
- The Pilgrim’s Road. This would lead pilgrims on foot, alongside choice sites and tourist facilities, between the two city squares.
- Paul Street. Aimed at turning the crowded, polluted and unpleasant central artery of the city, until then referred to as ‘a necessary evil the city has to learn to live with’, into a fancy urban avenue lined with attractions, high visibility shops, and trees and other plants that would provide a better, healthier, more attractive and more liveable environment. That avenue was to remain the main street of the city, providing the main services for tourists, locals and the entire rural periphery of Nazareth, but under much more reasonable conditions, in line with the development of similar urban centers and shopping malls which have sprung up in the past decades all over Israel.
- A vast hotel complex with a total of 1,900 rooms, whose terrain was to be granted by the Israel State Land Authority, and whose pre-prepared infrastructure was to facilitate the speedy completion of the construction project.
- Roads and parking facilities were to be developed, beginning with the restoration of existing battered highways and urban thoroughfares, and the imposition of new traffic regulations and arrangements which would put an end to the permanently clogged major arteries and the near-impossibility of driving anywhere, or parking anywhere when one did get somewhere. This was especially necessary for tourist buses whose volume and clumsiness multiplied the difficulties encountered, and which were shared as a matter of God-given fatalism, by the local population. Everyone had bought a car, a sign of popular affluence in modern Israel, but no one seemed to care where all those cars would be driven or even be parked when idle. Now, the solution loomed on the horizon.
- The market compound was to be refurbished and spruced up, and turned from a chaotic, untidy and busy place where the locals rubbed shoulders with each other, into an open, appealing and orderly public place whose sights and smells the common tourist could also enjoy. It was unthinkable that a pilgrim should come all the way to Nazareth and instead of relating to the very places where Jesus was said to roam in his youth, would hasten to leave the city once his prayers at the holy sites were completed.
- Rehabilitation of the houses within the tourist zone. In view of the general delapidation of the old houses, it was essential to at least rehabilitate those which were in the immediate vicinity of tourists, so as not to break up the continuity of agreeable landscapes on their itinerary.
- Promenades and observatories on the heights surrounding the city were to afford the tourists not only an overview of the breathtaking Galilean landscapes of Nazareth and its surroundings, but also a welcome opportunity to escape the congestion of its streets and the pollution of its roads once the city tour was completed, and to breathe the clean and chilly air

of the hills. Two particular sites were to be given special attention: The Mensa Christi (the Table of Christ) slope, and the tourist path linking the Qishleh historical building to the Holy Spring.

- Rehabilitation of historical structures which was meant to revive the ancient atmosphere of Nazareth by lending a renewed prominence to its historical buildings now fallen into neglect and disuse. Foremost of these structures is the eighteenth-century Ottoman Sarayah Headquarters, which was to become the City Museum.³
- The Brow of the Hill, from the top of which Jesus was said to have been thrown following the wrath he raised in the synagogue,⁴ was also singled out for development in the Nazareth 2000 plan. The mountain is located in southern Nazareth, and a park was to have been built encompassing its various elements into a promenade area: bell towers representing cities worldwide, a museum, a restaurant and spice garden. The first stage of the project involves the construction of an approach road and a parking area. A hotel of 1,800 rooms was to have been erected on the hill top.⁵ Archaeological digs in the caves of this mountain, also known as the Mount of the Precipice, have revealed important finds dating back to the Stone Age, including complete skeletons which occasioned great excitement when discovered.
- Guidance to the tourists was to have been enhanced by a system of specially designed multi-lingual signs, in order to facilitate the pilgrim's way around town.

The economic analysis of the project yielded rather optimistic prospectives:

1. Most of the expected tourists to Nazareth were to be pilgrims, with the months of March-April and October-November being the peak seasons. The expected daily numbers of pilgrims were estimated at 5,800, with the contingency planning providing for **10,000**.
2. While the number of hotel rooms in 1995 in Nazareth was 600, it was estimated that it would have to grow more than fourfold by 2000 if it were to accommodate the flow of visitors. All this enormous growth was predicated on private entrepreneurship. The projections also estimated that low-standard, not luxury, accommodations would make up most of the demand in view of the expected popular nature of mass pilgrimage.
3. An addition of 5,500 square meters of commercial grounds and 3,000 square meters of restaurant space were projected for the year 2000.
4. The transport facilities needed for the target year of 2000 were estimated to need to take into account some 190 buses, 40 minibuses and 1,000 private cars daily; although there was a high probability that on an average day only half that amount would reach the city.
5. It was estimated that as a result of the project 1,750 jobs would be added to the employment market of Nazareth in the short term, and double that figure in the long term.⁶

The plan was submitted to the Israeli government for approval and budgeting, with the lion's share of the IS132 million (around \$40 million), for the largest and most ambitious single Israeli tourist development project ever, expected to be spent by several government ministries and agencies over the years 1996-99. There was also to be a symbolic contribution by the Nazareth Municipality. It was estimated that this kind of public spending would generate three times the amount of private investment compared to government investment in hotels, commerce, restaurants, etc. and would create long-term and lasting benefits for the Israeli tourist industry.

This optimism was predicated on the assumption that tourism to Israel would increase by 86 percent between 1994 and 1999 and reach the all-time record level of 3.9 million per annum. This increase would boost the hotel industry by thousands of additional rooms throughout the country, contribute an increment of \$1 billion to the nation's treasury, and improve the problematic Israeli balance of payments. The project was also considered likely to create in the long run 8,000 new jobs nationwide,⁷ of which 3,000 would be in Nazareth alone.

Problems in Implementation

According to one narrative⁸ the whole idea of 'Nazareth 2000' was born in the early 1990s during internal discussions within the Nazareth Municipality between Mayor Zyad, his Deputy Jeraysi, the Municipality's Director General Abdallah Jubran, and Aharon Kfir, a public relations consultant. Originally, they called their plan 'Jesus in the Year 2000', and they wanted to use the Millennium as a lever to effectuate a breakthrough in the development of the city with government funds, in spite of the Israeli government's reluctance to pour money into Muslim-populated and Communist-led Nazareth for the purpose of a Christian-oriented celebration. But, when presented in terms of the benefits which Israel might draw from the increase in tourism in general, it began to sound palatable to everyone.

In 1991 the idea was proposed to the Ministry of Tourism; it generated interest, but no concrete measures – that is financing – were adopted at the government level. After the national elections of 1992, however, when the Labor Government was formed with the latent support of the Arab parties in the Knesset, the new administration recognized and stated publicly that it was committed to closing the gaps between the Jewish majority and the Arab minority in the country. According to Mayor Jeraysi:

This recognition also had to do with the unwritten agreement with the Labor Party whereby Hadash and the Arab Democratic Party would be part of the voting bloc that would enable the present government to come into existence. In the framework of this agreement it was decided that there would be a remedial policy with regard to the allocation of funds for development of the Arab sector.⁹

After the elections, Nazareth officials met with the new Minister of Tourism, Uzi Baram, who genuinely wanted to do something for the Arabs in his area of jurisdiction, and the combination of Nazareth as an Arab city with the special needs of the approaching millennium, prompted him to act. To him, the year 2000, at a time when the eyes of the world would be on Israel, was a good opportunity to close the gaps. Thus Nazareth, together with Jerusalem, were designated as 'priority A' recipients of governmental aid for the development of tourism. Baram made one change in the grand plan submitted to him: he deleted the name of Jesus from the title, in order to accommodate Jews and Muslims also, and the project got underway in 1993 under the appellation 'Nazareth 2000'. Thereafter, intensive work was undertaken to meet the approaching deadline: tourism studies were conducted, plans were submitted, steering committees were established, budgets were calculated, task forces assembled, and the Israel Tourist Corporation was appointed to direct the operation.

By 1994, some \$20 million had been invested in the project, mainly in solving traffic problems. However, governments come and go, and when in the middle of 1996, after the national elections which were won by the Likkud, Mayor Jeraysi asked the new Finance

Minister, Dan Meridor, about the fate of his project, he was reassured regarding the government's intent to pursue it.¹⁰ Jeraysi was concerned that in spite of the government's Resolution No. 825, dated 5 May 1996, which had also included the appointment of a Committee of Directors General of various government ministries to oversee the implementation of the project, the pressing deadline made the timetable almost impossible.¹¹ Jeraysi also wrote a letter to the incoming Minister of Tourism, Moshe Katsav, and implored him to visit Nazareth and maintain the pattern of close and fruitful relationship between his municipality and the ministry.¹² But judging from another letter from Jeraysi three months later, it seemed that the new government was not putting Nazareth at the top of its agenda, or foreseeing the upcoming events, and was reluctant to face head-on the Nazareth Muslim majority which had by then begun to show signs of discontent concerning the project, fearing lest it would boost the diminished stature of the Christian minority and dwarf their own. The road towards trouble was wide open and leading rapidly into confrontation.

Disgusted with the mounting difficulties at home, and with the apparent foot-dragging of the government offices, or simply their grinding clumsiness in the face of the fast approaching deadline, Jeraysi went to Rome (imagine a Communist Mayor going to Canossa!), to meet at the Vatican Cardinal Roger Etchegaray, the Chairman of the Committee for the Celebrations of the Millennium. At the end of this meeting, the Cardinal issued a communiqué confirming that in line with the will of the Pope himself: 'the Holy Land, especially Nazareth which had been the launching pad of the history of Redemption, will be, together with Jerusalem and Bethlehem, one of the great poles of the Jubilee'.¹³ Jeraysi, who was accompanied in his visit by the Ambassador of Israel to the Vatican, also reviewed the Israeli pavilion in the architectural Biennale in Venice where the Nazareth 2000 project was exhibited prominently and drew the attention of wide audiences.¹⁴

What is interesting is that the advertised hopes of the Israeli government, which were widely diffused in the local and international press, regarding the expected waves of tourism in the fast-approaching year 2000, stood in stark contradiction to the pace of the works on the ground. The *Sunday Times* of London, for example, announced that an investment of \$200 million was imminent to build 5,000 hotel rooms in Nazareth, with the enthusiastic support of Prime Minister Netanyahu, in order to accommodate the multitudes of pilgrims who would flock to the nearby site of Meggido, the apocalyptic Armageddon, where some Christian sects believed the world would come to its end in the year 2000.¹⁵

- The bombastic Nazareth 2000 plan detailed above had envisaged the building of 2,800 hotel rooms only for the millennium; that was behind schedule and even if accomplished it would perhaps serve the needs of spruced-up Nazareth alone. How in the world could anybody dream of building 5,000 more rooms, in time to accommodate the Apocalypse tourists?
- The site was occupied by an infamous jail for Palestinian convicts. Did anyone think that within three years that facility could be evacuated and converted to meet the Apocalypse?
- The reports also spoke of the conversion of the site into a historic entertainment park, perhaps like that of Tivoli in Copenhagen. But no one said what sort of entertainment was appropriate for the Apocalypse. Did anyone expect that pilgrims flocking in awe to watch and partake of the trauma of Armageddon would have the stomach for entertainment?

The hysteria was also aired in the usually sober Israeli mainstream press. *Yedioth Aharonot*, the

largest paper in Israel, revised upward the estimation of the numbers of tourists and pilgrims expected in Israel during the millennium to 10-14 million¹⁶ – three times what ‘Nazareth 2000’ had predicted – following the Pope’s summons to Christians to turn the 2000th Birthday of Christ into a Holy Year of pilgrimage to the Holy Land. According to those reports,¹⁷ the Director General of the Israeli Ministry of Tourism rushed to the Vatican to discuss the pressing problem of accommodating all those millions, and of spreading the pilgrimage over a few years prior and subsequent to the pivotal year of 2000. Voices were also heard advocating the need to distribute tourism between Israel and her neighbors in order to alleviate the burden; or even in favor of establishing tent camps to absorb the uncontrollable flow.

It was only natural that the first people to be taken aback by this hysterical atmosphere would be the Muslims of Nazareth in particular, and those of the Muslim Movement in general, who had no particular sympathy for Christians and their festivities. All the more so if Christianity was going to be enhanced and Islam diminished when the entire world, particularly the West and its media which make the rules of international fame – orchestrated by the Vatican – turned their whole attention to the Christian holy sites in the Holy Land and forgot that there were also holy sites for Muslims in this land, which had been under Muslim rule for many more years than it was under the rule of Christians, Jews or any other dominations. Certainly, there were overwhelming economic considerations to be reckoned with, but as far as one could gauge the mood in Nazareth, the fear of being marginalized, or flooded and displaced by the expected Christian masses, was far more troubling to the souls of the Islamists in town than the thought of fleeting economic gains in the few immediate years following the millennium. Therefore, they set out to oppose the implementation of the Nazareth 2000 plan and to create any obstacle they could at the ground level to hinder the works. The violent drama that would unfold in Nazareth, pitting the Muslim majority against the scared Christian minority, centered on the new plaza planned at the foot of the Basilica of the Annunciation as part of the Nazareth 2000 project; but this was only the tip of the iceberg. For in no time it would become only the visible symbol of the controversy and its most bitter outer expression while the hidden real issue was the struggle for the soul of Nazareth: would it finally become, once again, a Muslim city as its demography would imply, or would it persist, with the tremendous boost of the millennium, in reclaiming its Christian splendor in spite of its demography?

An unexpected ally loomed on the horizon that would plot behind the scenes, with the connivance of the government in place, to come to terms with the Islamists to the detriment of the Christians in Nazareth. This was the Shas Party, the ultra-Orthodox faction whose ten seats in the Knesset made it an influential and decisive partner in the Netanyahu government coalition. Not only did the very existence of the right-wing government depend on them, but they controlled the powerful Ministries of the Interior, Social Welfare and Religious Affairs, through which they could channel state funds to their cronies within their party and their likely allies outside of it. Its excesses and abuses of power – widely documented in the indictments of three of its Knesset members (and the conviction to date of two of them) – was orchestrated by their ‘untouchable’ spiritual head, Rabbi Obadiah Joseph, a former Chief Rabbi, who upon the completion of his term of office was intent on leaving his stamp on Israeli politics. He founded the Shas Party, which was an Orthodox, non-Zionist, Sepharadic and tribal grouping.

The stature of the Rabbi Joseph in Biblical and Talmudic Studies, and even more so his political clout due to the indispensability of his party in almost any government coalition, made him impervious to any attack or criticism. And so, when he gave his public backing to the leaders of the Shas party – even though they had been indicted – no one in the political and

judicial establishments dared to contradict him. When he violently attacked the Supreme Court, the very sanctuary of Israeli democracy, no one dared to move against him. When he rules his party and his representatives in the Knesset absolutely and government does not oppose him, no one is there to stand up to him. It is an extraordinary, unprecedented and unparalleled phenomenon for such an opinionated and iconoclastic society as Israel's, to simply stand in awe before this anti-educational model, who has no regard or understanding for law, democracy, debate, disagreement or right to dissent. Be that as it may, his authority is indisputable and his mostbizarre eccentricities are glossed over and forgotten. One of them was his alliance with the Islamists in Israel, who have never hidden their enmity and hostility to the Jewish state, as explained above.

This strange alliance cannot be merely explained in plain political terms, namely the customary courtship of Arab votes during the national elections. For, judging by the few percentage points¹⁸ gained by the Shas Party in the Arab sector – some of them by non-Islamists, even though the party was at the peak of its influence in government affairs – it is difficult to find a correlation between the high visibility lent by Shas to this alliance at the end of the 1990s, and the low yield of votes during the elections. Explanations must lie elsewhere, foremost of which is the cultivated mirror-image similarity between the two groups: both attract about 12-15 percent of the vote; both are growing more rapidly than rivals due to the high birth-rate of their constituents; both are loath to adopt or internalize the values of the Zionist state; both want a country controlled by the Holy Law (Halacha and Shari'a, respectively); both maintain their separate educational systems in order to isolate their youth from the corrupting influence of Western secularism; both shun military service in the Israeli Armed Forces; both thrive on a self-image of underdogs and victims of discrimination; both are culturally 'oriental' rather than Western; and both are more concerned about the preservation of their faith, culture and community than about the Zionist state. These many elements do indeed warrant a meeting of minds, and meetings of the leaderships, spiritual and political, of the two groups.

Even though this is hardly made explicit, one cannot escape the feeling that Nazareth 2000, the project and particularly the spirit inherent in it, lay behind this coalition. For the non-nationalistic ultra-Orthodox Jews of Israel, whose record of loathing the Christians and acting violently against their missionaries is long-standing, would conceivably feel as threatened by the millennium as the Islamists do. They can envision the physical turmoil, the spiritual torment and individual unrest that would grip Israel under the pressure of the millions of tourists and pilgrims who would be literally flooding the country. Everything would be Christian, about Christianity, of Christianity, by Christianity, and the entire land would appear to yield to this orchestrated invasion by foreigners whose omnipresence, backed by the omnipotence of their Christian countries, would dictate an alien pace of life and a strange sequence of events to this land. The ghetto-minded Ultra-Orthodox, just like their Islamist allies, are not equipped to deal with this reality, they are afraid of it and would do everything in their power to stifle it, thwart it or make sure it never happens. Thus, Islamists and ultra-Orthodox Jews, who see eye-to-eye on so many social and state affairs, and share a suspicion and fear of Christianity, find themselves to be ideal partners in this joint endeavour, strange bed-fellows as they may be.

The Gathering Clouds

The sequence of events that will be traced and interpreted below, began suddenly, without preparation, warning, expectation or anticipation, and can only be explained in the light (or rather obscurity) of schemes that were being woven behind the scenes. Back in 1994, it was Salman Abu Ahmed, then the head of the as-yet low-profile Islamist opposition in the Nazareth City Council, who suggested that a new building for the city hall should be erected on the terrain at the foot of the Basilica of the Annunciation. It is impossible now to gauge whether that seemingly innocent proposal at that early stage was a result of the rumors Abu Ahmed had heard about the fledgling idea of the planned plaza; and whether he wished to scuttle the project by suggesting a ‘neutral’ and ‘innocent’ plan ‘for the benefit of the city’ in its stead, since he did not command the majority to abrogate it altogether. Judging from later developments – when the same Abu-Ahmed, who now had the majority in the city council, was offered the option of building a kindergarten for all children of Nazareth on the plaza, and he completely refused it – one is tempted to conclude that this may well have been the case. At any rate, the city council in 1994 rejected Abu Ahmed’s motion, on the grounds that such a public structure on that location would further hamper the already impossible traffic conditions at that spot.

In January 1997, the city council adopted a resolution, with Abu-Ahmed present, but without his or anyone else’s opposition, regarding the construction of the City Square on that patch of land, in line with the Nazareth 2000 project. Nobody present, nor anyone else, claimed that the land in question was *Waqf*. However, one councilman did ask for an inquiry about whether that place belonged to the *Waqf*, and his request was recorded in the minutes. Usually, *Waqf* lands in villages or towns are settled continuously over centuries, are well known and well demarcated, and their trustees guard them and make sure no one trespasses on them. The local Muslim courts watch over their management according to Shari’a law, and the users who benefit from their usufruct are certainly concerned not to let their livelihood be usurped by anyone else; all the more so in a town which had been under Muslim rule for most of its history, and where Islamic jurisdiction had been the law of the land all through that period. It seems, then, that, unable to obstruct the city’s decision to go ahead with the plan, the Islamists in the council floated a trial balloon to test how the council of a city with a Muslim majority would tackle the sensitive issue of *Waqf*. For those who raised the question, it was enough if they could sow the seed of doubt, which was to take root and blossom in the coming months and erupt into a full-fledged demand, backed by violence, for recognition of the plaza as *Waqf* land, against all available evidence.

The Israel Tourist Corporation had budgeted IS6.5 million (*circa* \$2 million), for the plaza and tenders had been issued, but the contractor who won declared bankruptcy and the tender had to be issued once again, something that delayed the work for a few more months, while the deadline was inexorably getting closer and closer. The new contractor undertook to evacuate the rubble from the plaza in November 1997, and immediately thereafter to begin construction work. No one at that point, whether in the city council or outside of it, raised any objection to the work that was conducted in daylight, at the center of town, open to everyone’s scrutiny. Then, having exhausted all avenues of legality, the Islamists, apparently with support – or at least connivance – from unspecified sources whose identity can only be guessed, decided to come into the open and strike. Onto the scene stepped a new figure, the Head of the *Waqf* Board in Nazareth, Mr Abu Nawwaf who until then had been a rather shady man with little personal notoriety, although he had been implicated in previous *Waqf* scandals. It was the legal *Waqf* Reform of 1965, discussed above, which had permitted Abu Nawwaf to become the acting overseer of the Nazareth *Waqf* Board, and now he took the lead in the by now widely applauded demand by the Muslims in town that the municipality should keep its hands off the square.

In the beginning of December 1997, as the construction work gathered momentum on the plaza and there was a real danger that it might progress beyond the point of no return, Abu Nawwaf, and those behind him, decided to come out in the open and bring the matter to a head-on collision. On Friday, 19 December 1997, Abu Nawwaf showed up at the city hall and demanded to see the mayor in order to present to him his plan to erect an enormous mosque on the city square. It is clear that such a plan requires many months of gathering information on customers' needs and desires, as well as detailed planning, survey work, drawing and technical work, to complete. It is also evident that those who stood behind Abu Nawwaf, and their representatives on the city council, had concocted the plan long before it was revealed to the public, and had presumably collected the funds needed for such an undertaking which would have dwarfed the entire Nazareth 2000 project. The mosque project included an 86-m-high minaret, topped by a glass panoramic observatory that would have offered the best sight of the city (that was the pretext) and, more importantly, would have surpassed in stature the adjacent Basilica, showing to all who was the true master of Nazareth; which was the real rationale behind the plan. Horrified but composed, the Christian Mayor suggested that the plan ought to be submitted, as the regulations stipulated, to the city and then the District Urban Planning Board, for review.

Abu Nawwaf and his group had no time to wait in the face of the prospective bureaucratic process that would take so long that in the meantime the year 2000 would have come and gone, and the City Plaza in front of the Basilica would have become a *fait accompli*, a permanent fixture that no one could alter. Therefore, on Sunday 21 December, Abu Nawwaf and a group of his followers invaded the square, constructed a huge tent over it, lined it with carpets, and declared it a 'temporary mosque' pending the construction of the permanent one. It was perhaps no coincidence that the day for the submission of the plan was Friday, and the day of the invasion of the square was Sunday. The important point was that the Islamic message was driven home and attained its goal: it turned the City Square from the focal location of Nazareth 2000, where a large plaza would be built to celebrate the splendor of the Basilica, into a disputed patch of land where a new mosque had an equal right to be built. The authorities were slow to respond, that is they remained idle and did nothing, which led the invaders to believe in their right and to rally support around them, so much so that they won the local elections in 1998 and achieved the majority in the city council, thus vindicating their claim that they were representing the popular will of the Nazareth voters after the event. But the troubles had only just begun.

Notes

1 Roman, *Nazareth 2000*, pp. 1-2.

2 Ibid.

3 Ibid., pp. 2-3.

4 Luke 4:28-30.

5 Roman, *Nazareth 2000*, p. 32.

6 Roman, *Nazareth 2000*, pp. 3-A. [This was a different version to that mentioned in the above Note; only a leaflet put out by an organization called The Israeli Government Tourist Corporation].

7 Ibid., p. 5.

8 Ibid., p. 13.

9 Ibid.

10 Letter from the Finance Minister Meridor to Mayor Jeraysi, Document No. T-96-72461, dated 21 August (1996). This was in response to the Mayor's letter to the Minister dated 25 July (1996), in which he invited Meridor to pay an official visit to Nazareth.

11 Jeraysi to Meridor, 25 July (1996). This exchange of letters appears as an Appendix to Roman, *Nazareth 2000*.

12 Ibid., 20 June (1996).

13 A Vatican Press communiqué, 11 September (1996).

14 Jeraysi to Katsav, 18 September (1996). In the Appendix, Roman, *Nazareth 2000*.

15 *Sunday Times*, 17 November (1996).

16 *Yedioth Aharonot*, 18 November (1996).

17 Ibid.

18 These came to 3.6 percent in the national elections of 1999, when the Shas Party controlled the Ministries of the Interior, Religious Affairs and Social Welfare. See A. Ganem and S. Ozacky-Lazar, 'The Arab Vote for the Fifteenth Knesset', *Survey of Arab Affairs*, 24 (1999), pp. 1-4.

7.

The Shihab-a-Din Controversy

Once established and confirmed in their position by default, Abu Nawwaf and his people – backed by the vast support of the population which maintained around-the-clock watches to protect their new acquisition physically – became more vociferous and aggressive and opposed to any thinking of any compromise. ‘How could one compromise on matters of *Waqf*?’ one could hear them say. The very thought of compromise, which would henceforth dominate all attempts to settle the issue peacefully, was faulty inasmuch as it acquiesced in the existing state of affairs and recognized the right to take the law into one’s own hands, under the threat that ‘there would be bloodshed’ if the squatters were evacuated by force. Secure in their belief that no one would dare to take responsibility for any bloodbath, and strengthened by the endless stream of delegations from other Muslims, Arab local councils, political parties, even government officials who were ready to negotiate with the trespassers, they were confirmed in their ‘rightful’ position and began to lend a character of permanence to their makeshift structure: stone and concrete walls were erected around the large tent to protect it from the vagaries of winter, large groups of Muslims of all ages came and went all the time, regular prayers were held five times a day in the premises, everything signaling that they were there to stay.

The Local Elections of 1998

As the weeks went by, stories started to fly around rationalizing the takeover of the plaza: for example, the antiquity of the Shihab-a-Din Tomb, where the nephew of Saladin was supposed to have been buried after the Hittin battle of 1187. When asked about the identity of that martyr, the locals said that he was a hero from ‘the times of the Turks’, that is the Ottoman Empire, not aware apparently that the events they relate to the Tomb (twelfth century) had happened at least four centuries earlier than the Ottoman Empire (16th-20th centuries). The piles of rubble which surrounded the tent contained old bones, apparently of animals; but the rumor ran that they were human bones unearthed on the site of an ancient Muslim cemetery, therefore the land was certainly *Waqf*. And so on and so forth.

As the situation settled into a routine, with Muslims marching proudly in and around the tent, Christians avoided the site. Many Christians began to express their fear and dismay at the sight of violators of the law having the upper hand, some of them considered leaving the city to find shelter elsewhere. What stood in sharp contrast to these multitudes of Muslims rushing in determined to protect what they saw as their holy site, were the decrepit and crowded buildings all around which cried out urgently for their clearing from the vicinity of the Basilica in order to allow it to regain its past glory. What was to shake this paralysis on the one hand, and release all

the wrath and bitterness on both sides of the Hadash-Islamist divide, on the other, was the election campaign waged in the months leading to the local elections of 1998, in which all these emotions, attacks and counter-attacks came to the fore. Shihab-a-Din was the main focus and the chief concern of the campaign, as if Nazareth had nothing else to worry about. Nazareth 2000 was forgotten in the tumult, no one remembered how it all began. There was only one issue on the agenda – the Shihab-a-Din *Waqf* land. In other words, the Islamists had succeeded in overriding the government's and the municipality's agenda and substituting their own. The very name of the controversy – 'the Shihab-a-Din Affair' – meant that the Basilica, the plaza, the millennium and the grand plan dreamed of and elaborated over the years were no longer subjects for discussion.

The stakes were high: if the incumbent mayor, Ramiz Jeraysi, were to remain in place, he would pursue his legal suit against the squatters, whom he wanted evacuated in order to proceed with the work of the plaza; if the Muslim candidate, Abu-Ahmed, were to take over, then the issue of the plaza, and of Nazareth 2000, would be dead and buried. The angry campaign – which was accompanied by some incidents of violence and intimidation and had forced the Mayor to hire bodyguards, something never seen in local politics in Israel – ended inconclusively, with the mayoralty being given to Jeraysi once again, a tribute to his skill, wisdom and popularity. However, the city council was taken over by a coalition of Islamists who would neutralize the mayor and deprive him of his much-needed operating majority. The Islamists, headed by Salman Abu-Ahmed, got only 4 out of the 19 seats on the city council, versus the 9 that the Hadash-Communists could wield under Jeraysi; but together with another 5 Muslim splinter groups and independents, Abu-Ahmed was able to assemble a 10-seat coalition of Muslims and Islamists whose sole common denominator was a desire to prevent the building of the plaza and to push for the construction of a mosque on the site. If the elected mayor must be dethroned in the process, so much the better.

Another unexpected element, which probably had an impact on the election results, was a certain Dany Greenberg, who was presented in the media as 'the Prime Minister's Adviser on Arab Affairs', but was in fact in charge of Arab Affairs in the ruling Likkud Party. His presence in town had been noted since the eruption of the controversy in December 1997. Since Prime Minister Netanyahu had an official Adviser on Arab Affairs – Mr Motti Zaken, who was also involved in the dispute – it stands to reason that Greenberg was appointed by the Prime Minister to meddle in the Nazareth controversy informally, as a contractor of votes in the Arab sector, for the next national elections which were due in the year 2000. Greenberg often met with the heads of the Islamic group and their lawyer, Mr Dan Shafrir from Hadera, and arranged for meetings between them and various government agencies to which they could explain their plight. In other words, while the issue was being battled over in public, during the election campaign and thereafter, a parallel underground horse-trading deal was being concocted between the Prime Minister's informal envoy, over the heads of the state bureaucracy and of his own Adviser for Arab Affairs, and the Islamic group which the Prime Minister apparently decided to favor. So much so, that on 17 February 1998, two months after the takeover of the plaza by the Islamists, and nine months before the local elections of November, Mayor Jeraysi complained directly to the Prime Minister about Greenberg's suspicious activities; but especially about the repercussions:

For the past three weeks the media have been announcing that the government intends to transfer the plaza to the hands of those who have illegally and brutally taken it over by force and built over it a tent in violation of the laws of planning and construction. That group has announced its intention to build there a mosque and an Islamic commercial center, even though that patch of land is state-owned ... I have to emphasize that any further delay in settling this dispute will irretrievably harm

the Nazareth 2000 project where the state has already invested large sums of money, and Israel's image in the world for its incapacity to welcome the millions of expected tourists¹

It was a refreshing thought that the Mayor of Nazareth, who had made a career in the Communist-Rakah-Hadash Party by denigrating and discrediting the State of Israel, should be so concerned about its image abroad. But, as we have noticed above, politics makes strange bed-fellows. If the Orthodox Shas Party and Netanyahu's envoy could ally with the Islamists to get their votes, there was nothing extraordinary in Jeraysi's manipulative and desperate attempt to mobilize the Israeli authorities, whom he had battled all his life, in order to shore up his election campaign, knowing or at least suspecting, that they had ganged up with his enemies against him. Indeed, on 3 February 1998, the mouthpiece of the Communists in Nazareth accused the Islamic Movement of 'collaboration with extremist elements in the Likkud² who do not care about the interests of Nazareth'.³ That article also mentioned Greenberg as meddling in the issue and attacked Abu-Nawwaf in particular and the Islamic Movement in general for faking evidence in order to kindle an internecine war in Nazareth. Another local paper, *Kul-al-'Arab*, interviewed Dany Greenberg and quoted him as confirming that he had had long-standing relations with two leaders of the Islamic Movement in Nazareth, who had asked him to intervene in the dispute.⁴ The Nazareth Municipality, that is its Mayor, also released a communiqué warning the leaders of the Islamic Movement about their responsibility for the escalating dispute and calling upon them to evacuate the grounds they had occupied illegally to avoid being evacuated by the police. On its part, the municipality undertook to desist from any work on the public plaza until the question of ownership of the contended land was settled.

The Islamists, on their part, through their lawyer Shafrir, did not remain idle. When Shafrir addressed a letter to the Director General of the Prime Minister's Office and to the Prime Minister's Adviser for Arab Affairs, he naturally told his clients' version in the dispute, but made the point that the controversy was a minor one that could be solved locally (of course if the Islamists got what they wanted), had nothing to do with the Islamic Movement in Israel, and certainly not with the Waqf offices in Jerusalem.⁵ Was this an attempt to hide the fact that the Islamic Movement had played a dominant role in the crisis and had turned it into the main issue in the upcoming local elections? If so, he was well aware that promoting himself as the protagonist of the Islamists would not be good for him nor make the case popular in Israeli public opinion. The Islamic Movement, on the other hand, on the counsel of their lawyer, remained discreetly behind the scenes; and, to the accusations voiced by City Hall against them, they reacted through Abu Nawwaf who conveniently spoke for the local *Waqf* Board, not for the Islamists. But he spoke loudly and clearly: he was reported as boasting that within two weeks the construction of his mosque would begin on what he confirmed was a *Waqf* land, and he revealed that the Committee for the Defense of the Shihab-a-Din land hired the services of two Jewish lawyers, presumably from the Shafrir law firm, to ask for a court order to block any attempt to build on the grounds of the disputed area. He also denied that he had warned the municipality that he 'would burn Nazareth if his tent-mosque were destroyed'.

Abu Nawwaf (his full name is Ahmed Hamuda Zu'bi, from the powerful Zu'bi Clan already discussed above), was not a totally innocent figurehead in the conflict. While being the spokesman of the Islamists without admitting it, he headed the local *Waqf* Board, and together with Abu-Ahmed, the leader of the Islamic Movement List, established the Committee for the Defense of Shihab-a-Din.⁶ After the elections of 1998, where Abu-Ahmed emerged victorious and the conflict became a *cause célèbre* that was dealt with at governmental level, he took the

lead in the struggle which had by then become a political battle for the control of Nazareth. For, depending on who controlled City Hall, the question of Shihab-a-Din might be decided either way. But, while Abu Nawwaf led the struggle, it was quite instructive to look at his past record and observe with awe his persistence in applying his past experience in Nazareth to the Shihab-a-Din case. A few years earlier Abu Nawwaf had applied for a permit to build another mosque in Nabi Sa'in on the heights surrounding the city, at a time when his Islamic backers could not yet mobilize their constituencies for a showdown near the Basilica. He was granted the permit, but he overstepped its terms and built beyond the limits allocated to him. When the municipality intervened and asked for this wrong to be redressed, Abu Nawwaf and his followers squatted on the grounds, were impervious to reason and persuasion, and opposed any attempt to evacuate them. Because the municipality was loath to address the Israeli police or the court system, in what was considered an internal 'family' affair, the contravention of the law went unheeded and unpunished. Small wonder, then, that the same Abu Nawwaf should pursue the same methods later. Incidentally, in his communiqué of February 1988, Jeraysi tried to use the same logic when urging the Islamists to evacuate the plaza, for 'the people of Nazareth are reluctant to let the Israeli police intervene in order to carry out the evacuation orders of the Israel Land Authority'. In other words, turning to the law enforcement agencies was considered only as a last resort; and when this was finally done it signaled that something of a crisis had taken over the events.

The National Elections of 1999

Early in 1999, it became evident that the Netanyahu Coalition Government, in which the Shas Party played a dominant role, had come to the end of its road, and new elections were announced for May 1999, some 18 months short of the termination of its legal tenure. The national elections came upon the Israeli public only three months after they had gone to the polls for the local elections (in November 1998). The mood was still divisive and pessimistic, due to the deadlock in the peace talks between Israel and her Palestinian and Syrian neighbors, to the political scandals which were breaking on a daily basis, and to the economic recession which hit particularly the disadvantaged and drove the rate of unemployment to unbearable heights. Therefore, the election campaign was to weave together and sharpen to an extent rarely known before all the controversies, political divisions, personal ambitions, popular bitterness and fears, suspicions of government and of politicians, social gaps, inter-communal enmities and inter-religious tensions.

These turbulences in the midst of Israeli society did not skip the Arab population which suffered equally from them; perhaps even more so. For, on the eve of the elections, all sorts of coalitions, new loyalties, shifts and revivals of traditional organizations, such as the family, the clan and the congregation, were mobilized to satisfy personal ambitions or justify unexpected loyalties. Long gone were the days when ideologies and nationalism were the driving forces behind political organizations among the Arabs; perhaps only the adherents of the Islamic Movement remained loyal to their group. More important was the noticeable rise in inter-communal strife among the Arabs, notably between Muslims and Christians, to the point of triggering street fights and other expressions of hostility and hatred which involved entire religious groups ganging up against their adversaries and molesting them, causing the harmed party to seek revenge in a spiraling cycle of uncontrollable violence.⁷ In the past, unity against

the Israeli authorities under the umbrella of the communists, had done much to blunt these tensions; but the rise of Islam, which has become one of the main foci of identity for the Muslims of Israel, by necessity alienated the Christians who now started to seek new orientations. At the heart of this alienation between Muslims and Christians stood, of course, the Shihab-a-Din controversy in the largest Arab city in Israel – Nazareth – which had already turned during the preceding local elections into a highly visible arena of struggle between the two communities.

All political parties regarded the Arabs as potential voters who might either help perpetuate power in the hands of the right-wing Likkud and its Shas allies, or help swing the electorate to the Labor left once again. Small wonder then that their activities among the Arabs were as intense as elsewhere, and reflected the divisions in the country which also became their own. Generally speaking, there was hope among the Arabs that, by electing Labor and/or its candidate as Prime Minister, they would be likely to advance the peace process with the Palestinians and enhance their chances for equality (in rights, not duties) within Israeli society. The Labor Party tried to use the good auspices of the Palestinian Authority to swing the Arab voters in its favor, and even established a Jewish-American-financed association (al-Ahali) which encouraged the Arabs in Israel, including Nazareth, to vote its way. The Arabic newspapers in Nazareth (notably *al-Sinarah*) were full in the days preceding the elections, of advertisements presenting Ehud Barak as their future benefactor and urged their readers to vote for him.⁸

The incumbent Likkud and its Head, PM Netanyahu, did not spare efforts either, though they knew that their prospects were not very bright. They also published advertisements and tried to co-opt various Arab notables to support them. In Nazareth they sent once again that mysterious Greenberg, who had meddled there during the November local elections and wished to reap now the benefits of his previous fieldwork. It is noteworthy that Greenberg worked personally for Netanyahu and for his re-election, but was shunned by the Likkud election apparatus. The Nazareth controversy, in which much time and energy had been invested, could now be exploited as the Minister of Tourism, Moshe Katsav – who was also the Prime Minister's choice to deal with the Arabs in Israel at the Cabinet level – also controlled the funds of the now-halted Nazareth 2000 project. The Shas party, which controlled the two key Ministries of the Interior and Social Welfare, also entered the fray, making it known that the solution to the paralysis of the deadlocked new city council in Nazareth was within its jurisdiction (through the Ministry of the Interior). They pledged support, allocations, appointments and all manner of goodies to the Arabs. Its representatives visited Arab villages and starred in the election advertisements in Arabic.⁹

In April 1999, one month before the elections, Minister Katsav visited the site of Shihab-a-Din, and was told by the Muslims that it was the site of an old Muslim cemetery, and therefore that it had archaeological value and needed to be preserved. The Minister ordered the Director of Antiquities to inquire,¹⁰ but no conclusive findings were reported. On 11 April 1999, the Government adopted a resolution whereby a ministerial committee consisting of the Ministers of Tourism, (Katsav, Chairman), Infrastructure (Sharon), Interior (Swissa) and Without Portfolio (Ammor), was to report to the Prime Minister (Netanyahu) on 'proposals for the resolution of the dispute between Muslims and Christians regarding the contended square in Nazareth'. It was also stipulated that other ministers, and the Deputy Minister of Housing, would be able to join the committee if they thought they could contribute to the solution of the problem in hand.¹¹ Three ministers from the ruling Likkud and one from the coalition partner Shas (Swissa), were thus given a say in the committee, and in view of the approaching elections it was clear that each of

them would try to swing it his way.¹² The Prime Minister, who would be responsible for any eventual decision, and who had his own interests in being re-elected to consider, was already active on the ground via his representative, Mr Greenberg, who was already pressing for a solution to suit the Islamists who he had dealt with since they had invaded the disputed site.

At the same time as tensions mounted in Nazareth – caused by both the Islamic takeover of the plaza and the paralysis of the municipality which pitted the Islamist majority in the city council against the elected Christian mayor – pressures began building up from the outside. The entire Arab community in Israel became involved in the crisis, and Christian organizations from the outside began to interfere, either when called upon by the Christian minority in Israel which saw no hope of swaying the Israeli government in its favor, or of their own volition. In an attempt to avert a flare-up the Committee of the Heads of Arab Councils in Israel (CHAC), Arab Knesset members and clerics – both Muslim and Christian – tried desperately to mediate, to urge, to coax and to cajole, but to no avail. On 5 April 1999, an impressive gallery of such leaders from the Galilee, notably from Nazareth, Shefar'am, Kafr Kanna and Tur'an, convened in Nazareth and came up with an emotional appeal to all parties to refrain from violence. The list of those present included the Archimandite heads of the major Christian denominations in town, as well as lay leaders of the Christian community, such as the Director of the Nazareth Christian Hospital; and practically all the top religious, business and public leaders of the Muslim community – not least of whom was Abu-Ahmed who also acts as the Head of the Political Section of the Islamic Movement in Israel, and whose affiliation wavers between the Sheikh Abdallah and the Sheikh Ra'id factions.

The fact that Abu-Ahmed supported that gathering was rather intimidating. As the major contender for power in City Hall, the chief challenger of Christian authority in town, and the foremost promoter of the Islamic takeover in the city, he did not act in good faith when he summoned all these notables to back his claims. It was quite ominous that the appeal which was supposed to appease the emotions among the Arab population in Israel, in fact embraced – one might think innocently – the Islamists' view. For it elicited and received the 'support of our Christian brothers for the release of the Muslims' blessed *Waqf* properties' (Article III of the Appeal), and put the responsibility for the crisis and its solution squarely on the Israeli authorities (Article IV). That meant, that Christians and Muslims alike allegedly supported the Islamists' view that the disputed land was indeed *Waqf* and that any attempt by the authorities to settle the issue would discredit them in the eyes of all the Arab leadership in Israel unless it was to Abu-Ahmed's liking. This seemingly-unified stand of the Christians and the Muslims in favor of the Islamists, which was not in evidence in later events, suggests that this whole affair was a manipulative concoction of Abu-Ahmed under the innocent guise of 'national unity' and 'communal fraternity' between Christians and Muslims.

Indeed, pressures started to mount from Christian quarters, both inside and outside Israel, to arrest the course of events which seemed to be moving irrevocably in favor of the Islamists. Within Israel, the Christians were torn between their loyalty to other fellow Arabs which necessitated a solution of the conflict 'within the family', and their horror at the threat of being crushed by the Muslim majority and the mounting aggressiveness of the Islamists. This might explain the willingness of the Christian leadership in that appeal of 5 April to go along with the Islamists in a quest to appease them and not lose their goodwill totally. But when everybody realized where things were heading, and especially under the impetus of the growing concerns of various Churches around the globe, the Christians realized that they could not let down their benefactors abroad by being, or appearing to be, any less committed to the cause of Christianity

in the Holy Land. At any rate, Israeli government offices were busy reporting Christian concerns and contacting Christian organizations, trying to explain and mitigate their fears:

- The Israeli Embassy in London reported that the Head of the Church of Scotland, the Reverend Alan Main, had decided to cancel his visit to Nazareth and had written a letter to the Israeli Prime Minister urging him to safeguard Christian pilgrims and the Christian population of Nazareth.¹³
- The Embassy of Israel in Washington was contacted by Father Drew Christiansen, on behalf of the American Council of Bishops, who expressed concern about the construction of the mosque in Nazareth. He singled out the statements made by the Israeli Minister of the Interior and the Deputy Minister of Education (both from the Shas Party, the Islamists' ally) who had sided with the Islamists during their visits to Nazareth, and had pledged to encourage the government to decide in favor of the mosque.¹⁴
- On April 15 1999, the Minister of Tourism (Katsav/Likkud) and the Minister of the Interior (Swissa/Shas) were apprised by the Prime Minister's Adviser for Arab Affairs of the concerns of the Vatican and the increasing pressure from there regarding the dispute in Nazareth.¹⁵ That letter was occasioned by a warning transmitted on the same day by the Department of Religious Affairs in the Foreign Ministry, which was concerned about the manipulation of the media regarding an eventual statement by the Vatican in this affair.¹⁶ This untypically swift reaction of the bureaucracy suggests that the ministers in charge were very concerned to handle this growing issue with both care and expediency, and that the ministers were not totally impervious to the appeals of the Christians.

On 14 April the Minister of the Interior appointed a Commission of Inquiry, consisting of one government official, Mr A. Kal'aji (Chairman), Mr E. Lapid and Mr G. Aviner (former officials), and Professor R. Israeli (the author of this book; a scholar from Hebrew University, Jerusalem).¹⁷ In retrospect, judging from the way in which the Commission operated and reached its conclusions, one is tempted to conclude that the Commission was not intended to provide an independent forum for fact-finding and then recommending an exit from the crisis, but rather to cover up the fact that the Minister had his mind made up but needed the umbrella of a 'professional board of experts' – whom he thought he could manipulate, with the help of his representatives on the Board – to reach the conclusions that suited his political purposes. Be that as it may, the terms of reference were three-pronged:

1. To inquire about the problems facing Nazareth's notables, particularly the tensions between its inhabitants.
2. To report to the Minister whether it was possible to settle the disputes in the city without interference from central authorities.
3. In view of the fact that the Nazareth Municipality had been paralyzed since the November 1998 elections, the Minister was constrained by Article 143 (4)(2) of the Municipalities Law, the New Version, to disband the city council; but he wished the Commission to investigate alternative avenues of action before he resorted to such an extreme step.¹⁸

The Commission began its work at once, but its scheduled meetings and the easy pace with

which it proceeded while the crisis was peaking, left the impression that no one in the upper reaches of the government was interested in early results. It appeared to be preferable for them that the forthcoming elections of May should be over and done with first, and that the affairs of the Commission were far from being the most pressing on their busy agendas. In fact, on 18 April, before the Commission had had any time to meet or deliberate, the Cabinet – which was squeezed between the approaching elections and pressure from Christians which had begun to build up – issued a statement which in essence gave satisfaction to the Islamists while paying lip-service to the Christians:

1. The Government was acting towards building a public square [where?] that would serve the entire population of the city, along the lines [of Nazareth 2000] prescribed by the various government agencies.
2. With a view to implementing the Government's plans, the Government would act towards the immediate and total evacuation of the illegal tent [to where?] and all those who have taken possession of it.
3. In order to mitigate the tensions and help resolve internal disputes in Nazareth, the Government would allow the erection of a mosque [where? by whom?].
4. The Government would permit the purchase and use of the shops in the vicinity of the square for the purpose of the erection of the mosque.
5. The mosque would be built on an area including the Shihab-a-Din Tomb (135 square meters), the shop-complex (119 square meters), and an additional 250 square meters that would be allocated by the Government at the expense of the contiguous planned square; altogether an area of 504 square meters.
6. The Government would also allocate another patch of land elsewhere in Nazareth to allow the erection of an additional large mosque.
7. The mosque in question would be built in accordance with the specifications approved by the appropriate authorities.
8. A physical partition would be built between the mosque and the public square.¹⁹

This hasty decision was reached merely one week after the Government established its own ministerial committee to deal with the crisis (11 April), before it could convene or agree on anything, and only four days after the Commission of Inquiry was appointed by the Minister of the Interior (14 April) and before it had had the chance to meet even once. That meant that the Government's mind had been made up and that all the committees and inquiries announced with great fanfare were no more than attempts by a shaky government edging towards its end to secure its re-election. The text of the resolution was quite blurred, leaving room for interpretation, but it clearly placated the Islamists by aligning itself completely to their cause. The text did not mention at all the Basilica of the Annunciation, and advanced the absurd claim that the Government had decided to build the mosque in order to alleviate the tensions, while it knew very well that tensions would intensify as a result. The text was concocted so as to give a written guarantee to the Islamists along the lines promised to them by the Prime Minister's Adviser, the Likkud Minister of Tourism and the Shas leaders who had a stake in the Arab vote in the coming elections.

Eyebrows were raised in the West when it became known that the State of Israel – which from the 29 November 1947 Partition Plan to the Oslo and Wye Accords had owed its political, diplomatic and economic existence to, and depended on military supplies from the Christian

world – should now give preference to its sworn and most persistent enemies in the Islamic camp, just to serve short-term and short-sighted political interests. Moreover, even in terms of a wise domestic policy which prided itself on advocating the rule of law, it seemed incomprehensible that the Government of Israel was rewarding those who had illegally invaded the plaza, and showed no intention of evacuating them. It looked as if the Islamists' claim of *Waqf* – although everybody knew it was groundless – was vindicated the moment the Government consented to compromise with them by ceding to them part of what had wrongly become a 'disputed land'.

Before the elections, the Labor Party candidate, Ehud Barak, and his supporters negotiated 'understandings' with the Arab parties which would be fulfilled if he should become the Prime Minister. The United Arab List, in which the moderate Islamists participated, summed up these 'understandings' in a letter they addressed to Barak on 12 April 1999, and which included a stipulation that promised to turn Nazareth into a separate district and an Arab metropolitan center which would promote the establishment of separate Arab institutions, such as an Arab university.²⁰ In effect, such a model, which would have to be duplicated in other areas of the country where large Arab minorities dwelt, would have officially rendered Israel a bi-national state. Thus, the two candidates for the role of Prime Minister found themselves popular with the Islamists – Netanyahu due to his position on the 'disputed land' in Nazareth, and Barak due to his promise to construct the Arab-Muslim enclaves which the Islamists coveted in their ideological blueprint. Another letter addressed to Barak by the Secretary General of the Hadash-Communists, matched the demands of the Islamists, though the ideological rationales he advanced were slightly different (for details see the concluding chapter below).²¹

The elections were held on 17 May 1999, when it turned out that the Arabs in general voted overwhelmingly for Barak (95 percent); with only just over 5 percent voting for Netanyahu. Only a fraction of their votes went to the contending Jewish parties: 7.5 percent for Labor and less than 5 percent for Likkud and its religious allies.²² In Nazareth, out of about 30,000 valid votes, less than 1,000 went to Labor; the Likkud and Shas only polled an insignificant 70 and 60 votes, respectively. That meant that the Islamic coalition, which had won the majority in the local elections six months earlier, had violently slapped the Likkud and Shas in the face, despite, or perhaps because, of the far-reaching concessions they had promised them with regard to the mosque. Maybe the election of Barak seemed more promising to them in view of those pre-election 'understandings'; but his party was not rewarded generously as it barely polled 4 percent of the popular vote in the city. The Arab parties, on the other hand, won decisively with 12,000 for the Hadash-Communists and nearly 10,000 for the United Arab List, in which the Islamists were senior partners.²³

The new Labor Government installed in July 1999, was immediately faced by the *status quo* it inherited from the previous government: the Islamists were still squatting in the plaza; work had not started on the building of the square in preparation for the year 2000; Christian authorities were protesting the world over about the Israeli Government's handling of the matter; and the municipality of Nazareth was still paralyzed by the Islamists' majority on the city council which was pitted against the Christian mayor, Ramiz Jeraysi. The new Government set up a new ministerial committee, headed by the Minister of Internal Security, Sh. Ben-Ami, and joined by the Ministers of Science and the Interior. But, in the meantime, two major developments in the affair occurred which encouraged the Government to adopt a new course: the Commission of Inquiry appointed by the previous Government had finished its work and submitted its findings and recommendations; and the parallel legal course which had been launched by the local and

regional authorities in Nazareth at the beginning of the crisis had run its course. Another complication was that in their scramble to win the favor of the Muslim Arabs during the election campaign and its aftermath, both Labor and Likkud focused their efforts on mediating, making statements and lobbying behind the scenes regarding the burning issue of Shihaba-Din, and had cared little about the controversy in City Hall. These are the issues that will be addressed in the coming chapters.

Notes

- 1 Jeraysi to Benjamin Netanyahu, 17 February (1998).
- 2 The Likkud was the right-wing party of the then-Prime Minister, Netanyahu.
- 3 *Al-Ittihad*, 3 February (1998).
- 4 *Kul-al-'Arab*, 6 February (1990).
- 5 Attorney Dan Shafir to Moshe Leon, the Director of the Prime Minister's Office and to Motti Zaken, the Prime Minister's Adviser for Arab Affairs, Document No. V/1326- 000-128; dated 24 April (1998).
- 6 This was acknowledged by the report that Abu Ahmed wrote in July 1999, in response to the summons of the Commission of Inquiry (see below).
- 7 See Ghanem and Ozacky-Lazar, *The Arab Vote for the Fifteenth Knesset*'.
- 8 *Ibid.*, pp. 8-9.
- 9 *Ibid.*
- 10 A letter from Moshe Goral, an adviser to the Minister, to Amir Drori, the Director of Antiquities; Document No. 99-01-3832, dated 13 April (1999).
- 11 Letter from the Government's Secretariat, 14 April (1999), to the members of the Ministerial Committee, citing Government Resolution No. 4974, dated 11 April (1999).
- 12 The coalition lost the elections, making way for the short-lived government of Ehsud Barak (June 1999-April 2001).
- 13 Letter from the Department of Religious Affairs at the Israeli Foreign Ministry, Document No. 3705080 – dated 14 April (1999) – to the Prime Minister's Adviser on Arab Affairs.
- 14 *Ibid.*
- 15 Letter from the office of the Adviser on Arab Affairs to Ministers Katsav and Swissa, dated 15 April (1999).
- 16 Faxed memorandum from the Department of Religious Affairs of the Foreign Ministry to the office of the Adviser on Arab Affairs; dated 15 April (1999).
- 17 Kal'aji, who had served as the Director General of the Ministry of the Interior and was now the Head of the National Bureau of Urban Planning – a branch of the Ministry of the Interior – was known to be an underling of the Minister. Lapid, a former general in the Israeli Defense Forces, who had also served as the army spokesman, has participated in various commissions of inquiry in the past regarding Arab urban affairs. He was at this point serving a term as the director of the prestigious Ulpan Akiva, a school for training foreigners and new immigrants in Hebrew. Aviner had served as a colonel in the Israeli Intelligence and, later, as the Director General of the Ministry of Police. Israeli, an independent scholar from the Hebrew University, had some experience in Arab affairs in general, and was apparently to serve as the 'professional' on the board.
- 18 Act of Appointment of the Commission Members, issued by the Minister on 14 April 1999.
- 19 The Cabinet Resolution was issued on 18 April 1999.
- 20 The full letter and its annexes is reproduced in Ghanem and Ozacky-Lazar, *Survey for Arab Affairs*, pp. 30[^]. For details, see the concluding chapter below.
- 21 *Ibid.*, pp. 34-5.
- 22 *Ibid.*, p. 37.
- 23 *Ibid.*

8.

A City Paralyzed

While the Shihab-a-Din controversy was unfolding, and everyone was meddling in it, little attention was paid to the fact that Nazareth had been paralyzed since November 1998, when the local elections had produced the above-mentioned deadlock. It was the responsibility of the Minister of the Interior to ensure the functioning of the city, and he did indeed appoint the Commission of Inquiry which, among other goals, was to recommend a way to facilitate cooperation between the elected mayor and the Islamist majority which was determined to either oust him or to curtail his authority. But it soon became evident to all mediators, meddlers and interveners in the troubled muddle that had become Nazareth, that without a solution to the Shihab-a-Din controversy to the satisfaction of the Islamists, there was no way City Hall would return to normal. Moreover, there was a fear, that if the Islamists were vindicated due to the weight of their majority, they would be in a still better position to demand the total capitulation of the mayor to their will. Hence, the persistence of the deadlock, as the Islamists remained confident in their power to overwhelm the mayor, on the one hand; while the latter maneuvered to thwart them on the other.

The Aftermath of the 1998 Elections

Immediately following the local elections, which were conducted against the background of the Shihab-a-Din rift – when emotions ran high and some incidents of violence between Christians and Muslims threw the city into deep consternation at best, fear and panic at worse – it was clear to all that the crisis in City Hall would only escalate. At first it appeared that the mayor's List, which won nine seats on the council and consisted of five Muslims and four Christians – all members of the Hadash-Communist List that had ruled the city for the past 20 years – had little chance of enforcing its hand-off policy with regard to Shihab-a-Din, in view of the overwhelming majority of the Muslims on the council (15 out of 19). But in view of the battle for the soul of the city that was being waged publicly between the contenders, the moderate Muslims who sided with the mayor were no less insistent than him on the importance of restoring the *status quo* which had existed before any accommodation could be worked out. This position won them scorn from the rest of the Muslims, and even threats against their lives during the election campaign and thereafter. They, together with the mayor, resented the fact that the Islamists had turned a local inter-communal dispute into a major political and Islamic issue on a national and international scale.

The test of power which had violently pitted the parties against each other during the elections, and particularly afterwards, left no doubt that the Islamists headed by Abu-Ahmed, would

expend any effort to remove the Christian mayor from his seat in a city that had become predominantly Muslim. They did not hide their intention when Jeraysi inherited the mantle of his great predecessor and mentor, Tufiq Zyad, in the middle of his term. But they had to yield to the majority that the Hadash Party commanded in the city council, and to the personal qualifications of Jeraysi which made him the natural successor. But when the incumbent mayor urged the police in December 1997 to evacuate the squatters from the illegal tent they had erected on the disputed plaza, the Islamists were incensed and swore vengeance against him. From that point, the focus of their struggle was no longer the disputed square which was in their hands in any case, but the very person of the mayor, whom they abhorred and wished to destroy. The city council became their favorite arena for this struggle once the 1998 election results gave them the tools to achieve their goals by legitimate means. However, Abu-Ahmed's struggle – which hinged on the continuous loyalty of all those in his coalition of six parties, of which he directly commanded only his own faction with four seats out of the ten – could have been compromised if one of them crossed over to the mayor's side. However, this did not happen. Therefore, besides having to lead the Shihaba-Din debate to its successful solution, he was also hard-pressed to satisfy his coalition partners with all manner of promises and assurances for jobs, positions and titles, should he win his struggle against the mayor in City Hall.

Immediately following the announcement of the results of the local elections, all attempts to convene the city council were frustrated either by the mayor, who controlled the agenda, or by the recalcitrant majority which wished to impose its own. On the several occasions when a meeting of the city council was called, the councillors showed up at City Hall with their noisy and threatening followers, who made any deliberation impossible, and the meetings had to be closed before they started. Police were present outside City Hall when the first meeting of the council was announced after the elections, as they knew that violence might erupt. They had been in touch with the mayor during the election campaign and repeatedly warned him of threats against him, which had forced him to hire bodyguards. When the council was convened, they had to prevent the supporters of both parties from breaking into the meeting room. Nevertheless, according to police officers who oversaw public order on the location, various objects were thrown by the angry crowds at councilors who made their way to the meeting, tires were punctured on the cars that were parked outside the building, and inflammatory remarks were made. Even though the violations were perpetrated by both parties, the policemen – who took no side in the affair and wished simply to keep the contenders apart – tend to accuse the Islamists of more aggressive behavior than their Christian compatriots; which was mainly due to the fact that the latter are by far outnumbered and stand to lose more than the others from any violence.

These violent inter-communal outbursts soon spilled over from City Hall and its vicinity into the streets of Nazareth, and forced every community, most of all the Christian underdogs, to shut itself off from its neighbors and to ponder over the problems of survival in a hostile environment. Skirmishes gradually became a general problem, with police refraining from interference lest they be accused by both parties of exacerbating or encouraging the rift. (See the joint statement of the Arab clerics and notables released in Nazareth in April 1999, which was discussed in the previous chapter.) The street fights culminated on 4 April 1999, at the same time that efforts at mediation were being offered from many sides to ease the tensions. The night before, which happened to be Easter Saturday, a group of drunk Christians gathered near the most explosive location in town – the plaza beneath the Basilica of the Annunciation, where the illegal tent-mosque had been erected. The gang was pushed out of the compound by police, but not before a fist-fight had developed between the feasting Christians and the agents of law enforcement.

The next day another dangerous gathering took place in the downtown area, where the parties pelted each other with rocks, with the police trying desperately, but unsuccessfully, to keep them apart. From the minarets of the mosques in Nazareth, loud cries of alarm were sounded against the 'Christians who were storming the Shihaba-Din Compound', and the Muslims were summoned to its defense. All the elements for serious confrontation which could easily get out of control, loomed ominously on the horizon. But at noon, when large crowds of thousands of Muslims gathered on the spot and began attacking Christian passers-by and cars, the police moved in *en masse* and disrupted the attempt by the Muslims to march along the central streets of the city. The same scenario repeated itself on the coming days, but it was exacerbated by the call upon the Muslims in all mosques the following Friday to take over the city and defend the Islamic holy places.

In view of this grave situation, the mayor was pressured to accept a delegation of local notables and Arab Knesset members who wished to mediate and strike some sort of compromise; that is, to force the mayor to consent to the erection of the mosque, something he rejected out of hand. The result was a growing persecution of the Christians throughout the city, and their increasing fear caused by the inability of the Israeli police to protect them. Attacks against Christians were soon widespread in villages around Nazareth and the Galilee; this posed a new and serious challenge to the over-extended police forces in those districts. Even the Muslims who were members of the Hadash Party and had lent their support to the mayor, were attacked or threatened with violence. A deep and seemingly unbridgeable abyss was yawning between Christians and Muslims, to the point that some of the former who entertained doubts about the Israeli government's willingness and capacity to protect them, declared in their despair their support for the Muslims against their own coreligionists, rather than seek the uncertain protection of the Jewish authorities. One has to emphasize, nevertheless, that at no time did Abu-Ahmed or the rest of the Islamist coalition in the city council incite people to violence or voice sympathy for the violators of the law. But, nor did they attempt to restrain Abu Nawwaf and his gang, who continued to squat, demonstrate, shout, curse and attack their opponents. The councilmen elected to adopt a low public profile under the circumstances, but they continued their struggles behind the scenes.

The Struggle for Power

The solution for the Shihab-a-Din issue was not the only obstacle to the effective operation of City Hall. Factional jealousies and personal ambitions have also played a role in the paralysis on the city. According to law, the mayor is entitled to appoint a senior deputy from among the deputy mayors who are usually chosen from the coalition factions in accordance with their strength on the city council. The role of senior deputy ought to have gone, according to the election result, to Abu-Ahmed who led the largest party in the council. However, since the senior deputy also replaces the mayor when absent or incapacitated, Mayor Jeraysi refused to place that pivotal role in the hands of Abu-Ahmed, lest when replacing the mayor he might use his majority to overturn irretrievably the mayor's decisions. For a dynamic mayor like Jeraysi, who travels extensively and has undertaken many national and international functions, his absence would automatically mean a reversal of his decisions, which would throw the city into chaos. He claimed, not without justification, that his senior deputy ought to be a man he could trust would

follow his policy when circumstances obliged him to be away. Such a man, he asserted, could only be from his own minority party, and certainly not from the opposition Islamists who did not hide their intent to displace him when they could.

The mayor also believed that his senior deputy ought to be a man to his liking, who had the same vision and shared the same administrative style so that he could confide to him the authority and the executive power worthy of the second highest official in the city. After all, he said, he was elected by the public to manage the city affairs, and only a man of his choice and of like mind could fulfill those expectations. With no less conviction the Islamists asserted that their majority entitled them to the second highest position after the mayor; otherwise the popular will of the voters, who wanted them to represent the majority on the city council, would be distorted and invalidated. In this instance, for example, the Islamists, who certainly represented the will of the Muslim majority, could easily pass a resolution permitting the building of a mosque anywhere and at any time they wanted. This was a truly constitutional crisis which could only be resolved by national legislation in the Knesset or by a spirit of collaboration within the city council, when there was a will for it, or when the positions of the parties were not so polarized. But this was not all.

As a rule, the directly elected mayor concentrates in his hand the executive power of the city and is naturally reluctant to share it with others. He certainly needs a majority on the city council to approve the budget, the city projects and all senior appointments, and for that purpose he either depends on his majority party, as had been the case during the 20-year rule of Ziad, or needs a coalition with other parties to obtain the majority. Such coalitions necessitate power-sharing with and personal appointments of members from other parties on the council. The constitutional difficulty in Nazareth was posed precisely by this contradiction between what a coalition necessitated in terms of executive concessions to the partners, and the definition of the council as a legislative, not an executive branch of government. The situation was such that Jeraysi could not choose his coalition partners from a plethora of parties, but was faced with the cruel choice of either taking in the entire opposition (which was the majority and stood together as one bloc), or perpetuating a minority city government which was blocked at each step by a highly motivated majority opposition.

The Islamists also advanced the claim that as representatives of 70 percent of the Muslim population of the city it was only fair that they should participate in the government of the city so as to leave their imprint on its planning, way of life, management, priorities, and the like. To them, the majority rule they thought they possessed was not limited by any checks or balances which would force them to strike compromises and arrive at a consensus where the minority rights as well as the authority of the chief executive were respected. Like other Islamists in Israel and elsewhere, once they controlled the majority they thought they could enforce their decisions without any regard for others. They genuinely believed that not only did they have the right, by virtue of their majority, to have the dominant say in city affairs, but that they owed it to their constituency to show that they were performing the job they were elected to do. If, for example, they had no particular interest in the year 2000, being a Christian affair, why should they waste the city's limited resources on extravagant festivities for that occasion? Indeed, public opinion among the Muslims has been that they would rather continue their quiet takeover of Nazareth than be placed in the eye of the storm, even if the latter should prove more beneficial for tourism and business in the city. The Islamists do not tire of repeating that their faith clearly gives precedence to undisturbed spiritual existence over material well-being.

The Islamists stressed that a city managed under their aegis would devote more resources to

mosques, Islamic education, and welfare to the poor, as has been the wont of their brethren in Israel and abroad. But to do that means that they would have to control the city agenda. As a rule, it is the mayor who determines the agenda and invites the city council to discuss it. Understandably, the Mayor of Nazareth refused to have an agenda forced on him, while the members of the Islamist majority wanted their freedom to raise any point of order, at any time, to suit their concerns and obligations to their constituencies, or what they regarded as the interests of their city. In other words, they did not feel that their presence in the council ought to be just a rubber stamp for Jeraysi's wishes, whims and interests, but an expression of popular will of which they were the representatives and the envoys. They insisted, for example, on the right to name not only the senior deputy mayor and to fill in for the mayor, but also to appoint the other deputy mayors at will and not leave this matter to the exclusive discretion of the mayor.

The Islamists did not hide their election campaign slogan that 'Islam is the solution'. Unlike more radical Islamists who want everything now, they were more moderate in the sense that they acted within the boundaries of law and were prepared to wait patiently, build up their strength and gradually erode the *status quo* by constant pressure. Mayor Jeraysi is a secular man, who leads a formerly Communist party not as a Christian, but as someone who has been a fervent activist over the years. Therefore, he cannot accept or make concessions to a program which hails the Islamic Holy Law as the model to follow. For example, the Muslim fundamentalists in Umm al-Fahm, which they control, have enforced the separation of sexes at school, have banned alcohol in the cafés and stores in town, and even set up separate bus stops for men and women, lest their mixing might trigger sinful conduct or thinking. A city council ruled by the Muslims in Nazareth might very well emulate that highly praised model in this reputedly Christian city, and Jeraysi will certainly not accept this kind of approach.

So we have here not two sets of philosophy and policy which can be bridged, but two contradictory lifestyles and policies that provide a recipe for collision. This is the reason why the Islamists also insist on appointing their people to the middle-level bureaucracy, beneath the deputy mayors, in order to insure that their stands and convictions, namely those of the Islamist majority, be implemented in the lower reaches of the city government. The more of their men they have at ground level, they say, the more certain they will be that matters of education, city landscape, development, construction of houses of worship, housing, *Waqf* lands, etc. are carried out according to their views. The mayor, on the other hand, hiding behind his slogan of 'effective government', insists that public tenders be issued for works in the city and only skilled people adequate for the job should be examined, interviewed and recruited as public servants. Of course, there may be some manipulative plotting behind these public statements. For, even though Jeraysi has a record of efficiency and clean hands, he could naturally also harbor ideas on the better chances of the educated Christians to win jobs in open competition, or fears of Islamist 'censors' at all levels of the bureaucracy under his able management.¹

The Unresolved Dilemmas

The deadlock between the two contenders, that is, the mayor and the city council, would have been difficult enough even had there been no Shihab-a-Din controversy. But with the latter unfolding and clearly demarcating the lines between Muslims and Christians in the city, it was inevitable that both parties should entrench themselves in their respective positions, for any

concession on anyone's part would signal to its rival a total capitulation. While remedies would come from the outside, as will be described in the next chapter, each party was drawing up its balance sheet, evaluating its forces and its allies, and assembling its resources for the final assault. Maybe the plight of the mayor was the most poignant and seemingly the most hopeless even though, at first glance, he could elicit the support of the Christian West. At the heart of his unhappiness was the fact that he could not accept or be reconciled to the idea that his party had irretrievably lost its control of the city; and that not only was he likely to be the last Christian mayor of Nazareth, but that he was not even certain of completing his term, let alone of being re-elected. He was oppressed by the thought that his city, which has known universal glory as a Christian city, had become the arena for petty local politics; and that the city's attraction to pilgrims, to world class leaders like the Pope, and to tourists in general would probably wane as the Muslim fundamentalists took it over, Islamized it and turned it into a backwater center for the Islamic Movement in Israel.

Jeraysi had been, together with others in the leadership of his Communist Party, one of the harshest opponents of successive Israeli governments, very critical of their policies, and a proponent of Arab nationalism in Israel. As long as the Communist Party rode high in Arab politics within Israel and there was Christian leadership of the party, and then Ziyad's charisma to hold it together, he could find solace in the number of his supporters and envision a smooth path in local and national politics. But now, after Ziyad's death, he knows that without the presence of his towering sponsor and patron, he stands no chance of climbing to the top of the communist leadership, and even if he did the party has become so shrunk as to be almost marginalized. He understands that not only has his party lost ground to the Islamists in Nazareth, but that the rest of the mixed Arab villages will follow suit and bring to an end the 50-year history of the very intense involvement of Christian Arabs in Arab and Israeli politics. Therefore, belatedly, he is now trying to shore up his career and the fate of his community by getting closer to the Israeli establishment and seeking shelter there. Hence his advocacy of 'law and order', a 'clean government', a strict a-personal civil service, justice and righteousness, etc.; themes that had been far from the doctrinal ideology of the communists or the aggressive policies of Ziyad.

There was also no doubt, however, as to Jeraysi's commitment to the development of the city and to Nazareth 2000, which had been essentially his 'baby' since the inception of the plan. He had great ambitions to succeed in his rule of the city, to leave his imprint on it and be remembered as its modern builder, much like Teddy Kollek in Jerusalem. He also enjoyed his pivotal role in Israel and in the world due to the limelight and attention he drew from the Christian world in general, particularly with the millennium approaching. As a gifted technocrat and a conscientious administrator, he wanted his city to become a model for other Arab towns and villages in Israel. For this reason, he would do anything to remove the Islamic opposition, which he perceived as exactly the antithesis to what he is trying to achieve, but he also realized that the opposition represented the majority in the city and that its power would only increase in the future due to new demographic realities. In the meantime, he lives in fear, both in the short term for his life and the very survival of the Christians in Nazareth, and in the long term as he looks with horror and frustration upon the approaching end of this term in 2003 and the dramatic gains of the victorious Islamists.

In this situation the mayor has been inclined to accept solutions, including painful compromises, that would enable him at the very least to ensure the normal functioning of the city and to navigate the difficult and challenging period of the millennium with himself at the helm. He did not wish to miss his golden opportunity, at the height of his career, lest instead of being

the focus of world attention and the courted head of the city of the millennium, he would be remembered, and spurned, as the chieftain of a quarrelsome tribal grouping which had desecrated the spirit of the celebrations. He was also used to planning and doing things, dreaming up projects and implementing them, traveling, meeting and entertaining people, lobbying for budgets and mediating in rifts and differences, hailing people and smiling at them. He has had little training in, and no patience with, prolonged struggles that lead nowhere, endless arguments which produce only bitterness and enmity, and idleness which imposes paralysis and frustration. He had become tired of his alienation from the population he was supposed to lead and manage, and could not bear his demotion from a popular and sought-after mayor of a thriving city to an almost excommunicated head of a minority faction that had lost its standing in the city

Instead of being in the midst of the energetic implementation of the Nazareth 2000 Plan, that was to make his city modern and commercially prosperous, Jeraysi found himself busy plotting for his political survival, protecting his life with his bodyguards, hiding from public exposure and scorn, hunting for help from government offices and church leaders, and making a last stand against the Muslim attack on the city – or at least attempting to slow it down. He appeared very eagerly, on several occasions, before the Commission of Inquiry when summoned, and even accepted enthusiastically the proposed compromise to construct a kindergarten for all children of Nazareth on the disputed plaza so as to avert the building of the mosque; an idea that was rejected out of hand by the Islamists. He insisted that the ugly tent-mosque that occupied the entire space of the planned plaza be removed, so as to enable work to begin on the City Square. He condemned in public the violent skirmish that was triggered by Christian youths on Easter Saturday 1999, and was hopeful that the work of the Commission would convince the Israeli government to relent from politicking on the Shihab-a-Din issue and take a firm stand against the violators of the law.

By contrast, the Islamist Movement was in no mood to compromise, something which added to the acuteness of the dilemma. On the one hand, the Movement had every reason to feel euphoric, due to its mammoth victory in Nazareth; but on the other hand, they had every reason to be frustrated at their inability to translate the unexpected gift they received from their voters into terms of power and influence. They were enamored with the fact that their demographic strength, what they have called elsewhere ‘the battle of the womb’, has finally yielded its political fruit, and they are not about to let go. This victory symbolizes and foretells for some of them what is to come in their endeavor to win the same battle against the Jews in Palestine in the long run. They can indeed be encouraged by the statistics: when Israel was established 50 years ago, the proportion of Arabs in the population was only 15 percent. Since then, and despite the massive waves of immigration which have brought some three million Jews to Israel over the years, the proportion of the Arabs has grown to about 20 percent. They also know that while the pool of prospective Jewish immigrants has been drying up with the completion of the transfer of entire Jewish populations from Eastern European and Islamic countries to Israel, their own pace of growth has not relented and can only grow faster in the not-too-distant future.

This demographic predominance also gives the Islamists the feeling that they can now dictate the public agenda of the city of Nazareth, recruit their people to the city government, and soon, perhaps as soon as the next elections, take over the mayoralty. They sense that their majority also allows them to declare any place as *Waqf*, and in so doing this becomes a ‘holy place’ that no government would dare to doubt or contest. History, titles to the land, claims, legal proofs, public opinion, good-neighborliness, are all dwarfed by religious passion and self-righteousness that leave no way for compromise or concession. They know that if they insist long enough, under

the threat of bloodshed that might be caused if their demands are not met, the government, their neighbors, the Christians, Israeli public opinion and world opinion will cave in. They had tried this tactic in the past, in Nazareth and elsewhere in Israel, and they have always won something in any deal struck with them. They also know that their demands will always be backed up by Arab opinion in Israel, in other Arab and Islamic countries, and occasionally by some ally in the Western world. Why should they concede anything under these circumstances? Collisions have already occurred with the Israeli establishment: for example, in September 2000 Israeli Arabs joined the Intifadah declared by the Palestinians; and there were violent clashes with Israeli police.

The Islamists have also learned that they can use force, invade government land, build illegally, demonstrate and resort to violence, and they will remain immune from retaliation. For, as soon as a claim is advanced by Arabs or a *fait accompli* is achieved, the same scenario unfolds: Arab Knesset members arrive on the spot to picket with the law breakers, and when the police arrive to clear the invaders, the Knesset members, capitalizing on their immunity, lead the crowds in resistance against law enforcement. Stones can be thrown at the policemen, anti-Israeli slogans can be shouted, Israeli flags can be burned, roads can be blocked and public order disturbed, but the Israeli police usually faces all this with patience and restraint, under the orders of the politicians who do not want to exacerbate relations with the Arabs whose votes they might need in the next election. Then passions and tensions mount, followed by skirmishes between police and the demonstrators, and when all patience is exhausted and the police forces move in to re-establish order, they are almost invariably accused by the Arabs of brutality, discrimination, excess of zeal, etc. These counter-accusations, which are always backed by Arab public opinion in Israel and abroad – and at times by Israeli and world media – in the end obscure the facts of how it all started; everyone forgets who broke the law, and the fingers are pointed at ‘police brutality’.

While the Israeli police – like other police forces around the world – is not exactly the Salvation Army, the accusations launched against it indiscriminately very often do an injustice to it, and do not encourage it to deploy the requisite means to maintain the order, nor to move in swiftly as the Japanese or the New York police squads would to restore order and safeguard public welfare. Why should they take physical risks in their zeal to fulfill their duty, only to end up reprimanded by the politicians and scorned by public opinion? In the months preceding the escalation of tension in Nazareth, the police had been publicly lynched for its ‘brutality’ in handling the Umm-al-Fahm case, where crowds of Arabs demonstrated violently against the government and threw rocks and other missiles at the police. No one who accused the police of overstepping its boundaries in the use of force suggested any better means to quell the violence. Conversely, in a similar incident in Shefar’am a few days later, the police refrained from almost any interference in order to let passions calm down, and once again were harshly criticized by the press for not taking the requisite steps to stop the violence. Hence, their laxity in the Nazareth case, and their reluctance to take any forceful steps with regard to Arabs in Israel in general. The Islamists have learned these lessons, knowing the police would not dare move against them, and politicians would eventually approach them with offers of ‘compromise’; situations from which they can only emerge victorious.

The Islamists also trail behind them a long record of bitterness common to most Israeli Arabs, which has been translated into a rebellious attitude against the Jewish-Zionist authorities. From their point of view, their resentment emanates from their experience of having their lands expropriated, their majority in Palestine turned into a minority, and – most unbearable of all – the

Jews whom Islamic tradition had looked down upon as miserable *dhimmis*, having unexpectedly, unjustifiably, and unjustly become the rulers of the land. Their stupefaction at this quirk of history, where the pariahs have turned masters, can only be lifted when the Muslims become radicalized and allow history to take its 'natural course'. These thoughts, expressed by other Muslim fundamentalists are not foreign to the Islamists in Israel:

Hamas finds itself in a period when Islam was turned away from the reality of life. For this reason, checks and balances have been upset, concepts have become confused, and values have been transformed; evil has prevailed, oppression and obscurity have reigned; cowards have turned into tigers, home-lands have been usurped, people have been uprooted and have been wandering all over the globe. The state of truth has disappeared and has been replaced by the state of evil. Nothing has remained in its right place, for when Islam is removed from the scene, everything changes. These are the motives ... As to the objectives: discarding the evil, crushing it and defeating it so that truth may prevail, homelands revert [to their owners], calls for prayer be heard from their mosques announcing the restitution of the Muslim state. Thus, people and things will revert to their true place.²

The 'Islamic solution' hailed by the Islamists in Israel finds its roots in the above worldview, and they have been following it step-by-step. In Nazareth in particular, the Islamists feel that they have been squeezed by the Israeli authorities, as all around the city Jewish settlements – and lately also military installations – have been built, either to deprive the Arabs of room for natural growth and expansion, or to 'supervise' them closely and encroach upon their living space. The development of Upper Nazareth in particular, since the 1950s, and the plantation of Jewish 'observatories' (*Mitzpim*) in the Arab heartland in the Galilee, was seen as an encroachment on their land and way of life. Thus, if Israel had sided with the mayor in this conflict, the Islamists would regard that as yet another proof of the long-held Israeli policy of containing the Muslims and silencing them. Conversely, if their takeover by force of the Shihab-a-Din complex were successful, that would signal to them that the Jewish state could no longer confront them and they could try to expand elsewhere with an assurance of impunity, or even immunity.³

For this reason, they decided to build a large mosque at the Shihab-a-Din, with as many and as tall minarets as possible, and in close proximity to the most important symbol of Christian Nazareth – the Annunciation Church where Christianity was supposed to have started – in order to proclaim the era of Christianity to be over, and to announce the coming, once again, of the era of Islam. In the old days, as had been the custom of expanding and triumphant Islam, that transition would have been marked by turning the church itself into a mosque, as was the Aya Sophia in Constantinople (turned Istanbul), or in a myriad other similar examples in the history of Islam. But now, the Vatican, the Christian world and Israel would not permit such an action. The only option which remains is to dwarf the Basilica, marginalize it, hide it behind the new facade of a splendid mosque, eat up at its surroundings until it becomes trivialized, insignificant, forlorn and forgotten.

The Muslims in Nazareth have been offered other, larger, and much more dominant sites, in the city and in the heights surrounding it, but they want the splendor of the Basilica of the Annunciation to be obliterated; they wish their mosque to compete directly with it. In fact, for their own reasons, Yasser Arafat, the Head of the Palestinian Authority, Prince Hassan of Jordan, and other Muslim and Arab leaders, has appealed to Muslims in Nazareth for restraint and for the construction of the mosque to be postponed until after the millennium celebrations, but they wanted everything and now. On 23 November 1999, just five weeks before the millennium, and after they had obstructed the site for two years with their tent-mosque so as to make sure that the public plaza could not be constructed, they laid the cornerstone of the mosque.

While the Islamists achieved their goal, with the half-hearted support of a confused and

wavering Israeli Government which now had second thoughts about its decisions, Christians in Nazareth and elsewhere were in a state of consternation and found it difficult to understand what had happened: was this the Israel which pretended to protect minority rights and freedom of religion, who now succumbed to violence and threats? Was this the Israel which had always found solace and support in the West, who now gave way to pressure from Muslims but refused to listen to Christian supplications from around the world? How could Israel form alliances with her indigenous Muslims, who did not hide their hostility and contempt for her, against the Christian world which should be her saviour in case of an all-out Islamic onslaught? Would the millennial Judeo-Christian claims to the same roots of faith and tradition, as exemplified by their common biblical heritage, be obscured by politics of expediency? Churches all over Israel closed their doors in protest on the day the cornerstone was laid, the heads of several Churches expressed their displeasure and confusion over the stand taken by the Israeli government, and the Vatican lashed out at Israel and accused it of inciting inter-communal tensions in Nazareth.

But while these events were unfolding, the constitutionally and politically paralyzed city of Nazareth had to continue functioning and providing services for its citizens. Garbage was collected, schools were open, taxes were levied, water was supplied and City Hall was open. But the council did not meet, could not meet. The mayor and his administration continued to lobby government offices for budget, but they spent more and more time plotting their defense and survival rather than attending to the people's needs. City spending was blocked by the council for a year as it could not convene to approve it; this only allowed for the coverage of current expenditure according to the previous year's approved budget. There were signs of a steep drop in payment of taxes by citizens who used this opportunity of administrative chaos to settle their own accounts with the municipality. Some said openly that they refused to finance the policies of the mayor with their taxes as they ran counter to the interests of the majority of the population. In short, the rate of activity in City Hall, which on normal days teemed with visitors, lobbyists and citizens who had come to pay their bills or seek favor from the local government, was now half deserted with the only activity or pursuit of interests in sight being those of the Christians and supporters of the mayor. Despite this, the city center continued to thrive as before: the stores and the markets carried on with their usual business, but tension hung heavy in the air, pending the important decisions to come.

Notes

- 1 The stalemate will continue until the next municipal elections of 2003; at which time, Abu-Ahmed, if he is still around, will undoubtedly be elected mayor. Jeraysi has been forced to name Abu-Ahmed as his deputy mayor.
- 2 The Hamas Charter, Article IX. See Israeli, 'Muslim Fundamentalists', p. 112.
- 3 The stalemate continues. There is a court order to evacuate the grounds, but Muslims continue to prayer there on a daily basis until their demand for a mosque is implemented. The Government does not dare to oust them, for fear of bloodshed.

9.

The Commission of Inquiry

At the same time as the political meddling described above, an official Commission of Inquiry was set up by the Minister of the Interior to recommend a way out. In retrospect, one wonders whether the Commission, established merely a few weeks before the elections, was intended to gain time until the elections were over, or simply to provide a valid excuse for the Government's inability to act and resolve the escalating problem. The issue had been brewing for one and a half years, and no one seemed in a hurry to provide any solution. The municipality had been paralyzed for six months, and no one seemed to be overly concerned about it. Elections, both local (in 1998) and national (1999), were the only additional events which might have prompted the authorities to act.

The Commission's Terms of Reference

The Commission was appointed on 14 April 1999 by Minister Swissa of the Shas Party. Mr Amram Kal'aji was designated Chairman, and General (Reservist) Ephraim Lapid and Professor Raphael Israeli were asked to serve as members. Gad Aviner, a former military officer, was nominated as the Secretary of the Commission. To understand the role that the Commission was to play in the Minister's schemes, one has to grasp first the background of the appointees. The Chairman was a former Director General of the Ministry of the Interior, a Shas appointee, currently serving as the powerful Chairman of the National Urban Planning Board. His position, both *vis-à-vis* the Minister and in his capacity on the Board, ensured that he would have a firm handle on the work of the Commission and strong influence on pushing for the implementation of its recommendations when they were reached. His long service as the Commissioner for the Northern District, had made him extremely knowledgeable about urban affairs and the Arabs of Nazareth, as well as a loyal envoy for the various religious Ministers (first the National Religious Party and then the Shas Party) who were in charge of the Ministry of the Interior during his tenure. A skillful negotiator and a man of compromise, he avoided confrontation all along and aspired to accommodation.

Unlike the Chairman, who was both a government official and a political appointee, and therefore sensitive to his Minister's directives, the other members were supposedly independent and not affiliated in any form to the government, although all had a strong record of public service behind them; something which made them fit for the job at hand. Lapid, an Arabist by training, had served as the Israel Defense Forces Spokesman, and since the end of his military duty he has been the Director of the reputed Ulpan Akiva, the most important institution for teaching the Hebrew language to new immigrants and foreigners in Israel. He has served on

various assignments to determine the areas of jurisdiction for various districts and has a solid knowledge of Arab affairs in Israel. Israeli, a scholar from the Hebrew University, who has written on Arab and Islamic matters, was deemed a worthwhile addition to the Commission in order to lend to it an aura of objectivity, respectability and thorough research which would be free from biases and political scheming. Aviner, an experienced administrator and a former Army officer, had first-hand knowledge of Arab problems, but also of the security issues involved. The Commission was seen, and publicized, as the body which would provide the answer to the increasingly explosive timebomb in Nazareth.

On 14 April, the Commission was directed to complete – with no time frame specified – a three-pronged investigation:

1. To examine the problems facing the city notables and particularly the tensions between the various communities in the city.
2. To report to the Minister whether it was possible to resolve those tensions, to re-establish peace and quiet, and to find solutions to the dissent without having to resort to government measures.
3. To advise the Minister whether there were alternative ways to set into motion the normal functioning of the Nazareth Municipality, which had been paralyzed since the 1998 elections, before necessary steps were taken, according to the Minister's legal authority, to dismantle the city council.

Taking into account the political machinations behind the scenes, as described above, the slow pace in the proceedings of the Commission, and the parallel measures and decisions that were adopted by the Government as the Commission was being set up, it is now evident that the latter was no more than a fig leaf to cover the already adopted resolution to give in to the Islamists with a facade of respectability, proper government and good manners. At no time, indeed, did the Minister who appointed the Commission think about dissolving the city council, or denying the Islamists their actual illegal possession of the plaza, or move to ensure that the plaza would be ready at the deadline for the 2000 celebrations. His alliance with the Islamists described above in fact may have dictated his negative approach to the whole idea of the millennium, and he did not seem to be in any rush to advance that cause. The fact that the Commission was not pressed at any time, neither before the national elections of 1999 nor subsequent to them, to expedite the report of its findings, also tends to corroborate this view. Moreover, the repeated individual attempts made by various members of the Commission, apparently under its Chairman's prodding or assent, but never reported beforehand at the Commission's meetings and only reluctantly confirmed after the fact, is evidence enough that what was happening behind the scenes was more important than outward appearances. The assumption must have been that any attempt at mediation behind the scenes, which pleased the Chairman who acted on orders from his Minister, would be at any rate rubber stamped by the Commission.

The Commission did interview the representatives from the parties to gauge their views; they visited the disputed plaza, including the tent-mosque, talked to notables and passers-by, interrogated government and city officials and solicited the opinions of various experts on Arab affairs, including several ex-Advisers for Arab Affairs to the Prime Minister. Written statements and hefty dossiers were also submitted by the parties to the Commission, either upon the latter's explicit demand or of their own volition. At first, not knowing about the behind-the-scenes attempts at reconciliation, propositions were advanced during the Commission's meetings with

the parties, for arriving at some common denominator that would put an end to the crisis. For example, the idea to build a kindergarten in the disputed area, instead of a plaza or a mosque was enthusiastically embraced by the Christians but rejected out of hand by the Islamists. Now it is apparent that the latter knew something the Commission did not officially know, namely that if they insisted long enough and forcefully enough, their demands would be met, at least half way.

It became immediately apparent to the Commission that the problem was too broad to investigate and solve in a short period of time; and too complex to resolve to one party's satisfaction without seriously annoying the other. It also became evident that the problem at hand was not merely local and municipal, communal and intercommunal – it was also pregnant with long-term and far-reaching implications for future relations between Muslims and Christians in Israel and in the world; for the relationships between each one of those communities and the Jews and the State of Israel; for the very character of the Arab minority in Israel in years to come; and for Israel's international relations in general. This necessitated an interdisciplinary approach, a multi-layered analysis and a broad look at the problem. The legal, religious, historical, political, communal, social and economic aspects were all studied; and the importance of public relations, internal security, public interest and state interest were taken into consideration.

The Commission was acutely aware of the tendency in liberal democracies to quench fires, plaster over differences and bridge gaps to gain time, calm passions and come to the next elections ready to face the public with a record of peace and prosperity, freedom from fear and assurances for the future. There was a feeling – it now turns out to have been naive, idealistic and non-partisan – that the Commission had to transcend short-sighted and politically laden generalities and expediencies and look at the root problems to achieve a permanent and long-term remedy. That meant that the Commission had to strike a balance between short-term and long-term interests, and between real interests and imaginary ones: would its actions lead to an immediate extinguishing of the fire, but much greater flare ups in the future; a fake peace today that might explode violently tomorrow? There had to be a meticulous application of law and order, so as not to create precedents that might militate against such in the future if conveniently overlooked by the Commission now.

By reading the materials, visiting the site, and listening to the many protagonists and antagonists for each viewpoint, the Commission soon realized that what was at stake were not only measurable facts and verifiable events, but also legends, guesses, beliefs, rumors and emotions that no amount of evidence or reasoning could discard or refute. The Commission was well aware that people are usually prepared to fight, and even die, for their beliefs even if they are baseless. Therefore, the problem it faced was not whose claims were more credible or more 'just', but how to respect all views and convictions and at the same time ensure some kind of a workable coexistence between them. The record was not very encouraging as the city had known in its long history far more disagreement and conflict than cooperation and conciliation. Until modern times, the city had passed from hand to hand, and regardless of who ruled, there was always a sharp divide between those who were the sovereigns and absolute rulers and those who were the subjects and the governed. The fortunes of the relations between the Muslims and the Christians had always been linked to the identity, the policy and sometimes the whims of the ruler. Only in modern times, under the British Mandate and then Israel, did Nazareth come under a less tyrannical and more impersonal style of government, with democratic elections where the people decided not only their own mayor and city council, but also their national government. But the tensions, latent and explicit, have never been completely excised from the scene.

The Commission also understood that the never-ending tensions and struggles in and about Nazareth were usually articulated in various forms – first Jews against Christians; then Crusaders against native Muslims; then the Christian majority against the Muslim minority; and now the other way around; and, in between, the rift between the Communists and the Islamists. Basically, however, these disputes have been expressions of competition, jealousies, fears, power, enmity, hostility and one-upmanship between Christians and Muslims; at times garnished by internal dissents between various Christian denominations, or various groups, families and organizations among the Muslims. Like during the civil war in Lebanon in the 1970s and 1980s, when it was politically incorrect to talk about a ‘religious war’, and everyone used the euphemisms of ‘progressives’ (the Muslims, supported by the Syrians and some Western countries), versus the ‘reactionaries’ (the Christians, backed by other Western countries and Israel), so it has always been in Nazareth, until the current crisis broke out. Therefore, it was evident from the outset that legal means, persuasion, good will and plain common sense would be in vain, because no law can change a belief, and no coercive measures can quell a faith as long as a large group is convinced of its rights and is ready to fight for them; especially when it finds allies in outside forces that sustain it, encourage it, and push it to escalate the confrontation.

Against this background of a no-win situation and the growing feeling that it was being manipulated by politicians, the Commission worked simultaneously through informal networks, led by its Chairman, probably under orders from his Minister, and through the official slow-moving channels; apparently to save the face of the Minister who had appointed it. The first course of action allowed for no minutes, no evidence, no ruling; only coaxing, pressuring and behind-the-scenes oral messages. Promises and ‘understandings’ were hinted at and passed around. It is therefore difficult to account for all that was done there. Occasionally, this or that member of the Commission, notably its Chairman, would report about some ‘progress’ that had allegedly been achieved on one detail or another, in this or that meeting, planned or unexpected; but at no time was there a clear picture of who did what and by whose authority, nor whether the problem was heading toward any kind of resolution. But there is no doubt that as the official course of the Commission proceeded, the outcomes of these hidden meetings were feeding into the thinking of the Commission members.

The Mayor’s Narrative

The first witness to appear before the Commission was Mayor Jeraysi who had been at the helm of his city since the crisis began. In a very articulate and rational fashion he unfolded his narrative. From his point of view two main villains were at the root of the problem: Abu Nawwaf, the man in charge of the *Waqf* in Nazareth, and Dany Greenberg who had lobbied for the incumbent Prime Minister Netanyahu prior to the elections. He was visibly frightened when he was making his statement, particularly when he was dubbed by the Muslims in town ‘Salman Rushdi’, which indicated a threat to his life, or a ‘Serbian pig’, alluding to what the Serbs had done to the Muslims of Bosnia. He had been also accused of having collected the bones of Muslims and thrown them onto the city dump.

The mayor went again through the first meeting of the newly elected council held in December 1998. He said that the Islamists wanted to bring in television to broadcast the deliberations, but he, concerned that the media might lead passions to get out of control, refused. He also asked the

local chief of police to send his representative to the inaugural council meeting. When the meeting was convened, he tabled before the council his proposal to elect a senior deputy mayor who could act as his replacement when needed; but the majority of the council, that is the coalition of the Islamists, rejected his proposal, as they rejected his plea for prepatory talks to attempt conciliation prior to the formal meeting. Failing that *démarche*, the mayor also suggested that two deputy mayors should be elected, as the law warrants; but due to the deadlock in City Hall and the absence of a coalition which could command a majority, he would not transfer any executive authority to them, which meant that they would not be entitled to salaries. He then attempted a package deal whereby his senior deputy mayor would be elected from his party, while the Islamists could put forward their own two candidates as deputy mayors. But when he declared a vote on the Islamist candidates for deputy mayors, the latter refused to participate and the meeting was closed without any resolution being reached.

Soon the mayor understood, like everybody else, that only the settlement of the Shihab-a-Din issue would enable the municipality to begin to function again normally. The mayor explained the genesis of that controversy to the Commission in a way that seemed to completely exclude the Muslims' rights to the square, while stressing the use of the Nazareth 2000 plan as a way of circumventing the controversial issue. He said that under Ottoman rule, between the years 1906 and 1910, a military academy (Al-Maktab al-Harbi) had been built on the square at the foot of the Basilica of the Annunciation. That structure was next to the Shihab-a-Din Tomb (134 square meters) as well as stores (119 square meters); both of which had been *Waqf* assets from time immemorial, and were administered by the *Waqf* official (*mamur al-awqaf*) from Acre. Another local *Waqf* was founded for and dedicated to the White Mosque by the Fahum family of Nazareth. The *Waqf* status of these two assets was registered in 1938 under the British Mandate. At that time, the military academy was not registered as *Waqf*, its grounds being understood to be land that belonged to the state. It was not until 1943 that the British Mandate registered the school under the title of the British High Commissioner, for the benefit of the Mandatary Government of Palestine.

According to the mayor's narrative, the Government of Israel had inherited the properties of the Mandatary Power in the territories which came under Israel's jurisdiction after 1949, and took possession of the school and its grounds. Moreover, since all *Waqf* lands in Israel passed under the control of the Development Authority, this applied to the Shihab-a-Din Tomb as well as the adjoining stores. The old military academy continued to operate as a highschool for the children of Nazareth, owned by the Government of Israel but operated by the municipality. In 1980, City Hall asked the Israeli Government to transfer the title on that school to the municipality because it was part of its responsibility to operate highschools in the city. In 1983, following a protracted negotiation, a deal was sealed which obliged the government to make the transfer and the municipality to pay, in return, the value of the asset as determined by a real estate appraiser. This agreement was approved by a court of law and received the validity of a judgment. However, since the municipality could not disburse the agreed amount, the *status quo* persisted; that is, the government continued to own the asset and the municipality to operate it without paying anything in return.

In the context of the Nazareth 2000 plan, which was discussed and adopted by the municipality in the early 1990s, the government agreed to waive the payment that had been agreed with City Hall in return for the disposal of the grounds to the benefit of the city, provided it was used as a public space. When the issue was discussed in the city council in 1994, Mr Abu-Ahmed, the Head of the Nazareth Islamists, then in the minority and in opposition, suggested

that a worthy City Hall ought to be erected on the cleared site of the school to replace the small and shabby structure in use then. However, due to the traffic jams that a central and busy building would have caused in the already clogged and narrow place along the main artery of the city, the idea was promptly discarded by the city council. The point is that not only did no one raise on that occasion any objection based on the 'sanctity' of that spot, but it was the leader of the Islamists himself, who later became the champion of the Islamist cause in the crisis, who raised the issue. That meant, at the very least, that neither he nor anyone else was aware of, or thought that, the space under consideration was a *Waqf* land.

In January 1997, the city council, with Abu-Ahmed present, adopted a resolution to go ahead with the plaza project. On that occasion, however, a Muslim member of the council (not Abu-Ahmed), expressed a reservation that the land may be *Waqf*; he therefore requested that the issue be investigated before the project was cleared. But, due to the events of 21 December 1997, in which the Islamists took over the plaza under claim of *Waqf*, the entire issue of investigating whether or not it was indeed *Waqf* became theoretical. The Islamists could, of course, claim that the municipality had had an entire year to verify the claim of *Waqf*, but since it had done nothing in that direction, they felt that unless they moved in their demand for the mosque would go unheeded. It was not until 6 January 1998, that is two weeks after the outbreak of the crisis, that the municipality in fact acted; perhaps a year too late to defuse the building tensions. The city sent a delegation to the Mufti of Jerusalem to verify the *Waqf* register, but in the meantime, in November 1997, a contractor had begun cleaning up the rubble of the destroyed old school in order to begin the work on the plaza. That meant that within a period of ten months, from January 1997 when the resolution to build was adopted until work began in November, the door had been wide open to negotiations, before any action was taken.

Thus, only when the work came to a standstill, by reason of the Islamist invasion of the place, did the inquiry begin. At the *Waqf* land register in Jerusalem, only the Shihab-a-Din Tomb and the terrain of the adjoining shops, as described above, were found to be part of the *Waqf*. South of these *Waqf* assets the school structure was mentioned as belonging to the state; in other words, the *Waqf* assets were not only defined in their own right, but also indirectly by the adjoining boundaries of the state-owned land of the school. That registration was validated by the British Mandate in 1938; in 1948 that *Waqf* land was confiscated by the Israeli authorities, and in 1965, following the reform mentioned above, the local *Waqf* Board of Nazareth took it over while the school and its terrain remained securely the Israeli government's property, with no one challenging that deed.

Together with the above-mentioned deeds, correspondence exists in the files of the Mufti's land register from the years 1922-24 to the effect that the operators of the Shihab-a-Din *Waqf* asked for permission to build shops near the Tomb in order to produce income for the upkeep of the Tomb. These requests referred to the terrain adjoining the Tomb, which was indeed *Waqf* land, but did not mention any other *Waqf* asset in the immediate vicinity; which tends to confirm that the nearby terrain where the school had been built in Ottoman times was not claimed as being *Waqf*. The documents in the register also specify that the area approved for construction was about one-third of the terrain, which is the precise proportion between the built-up structures and the total area on which they were built. It is simply impossible that allusion was made to the entire piece of land, including the plaza whose surface area is far larger than twice the Shihab-a-Din Complex. Moreover, in the year 1985, when the local Nazareth *Waqf* Board was set up, it only claimed ownership of the Shihab-a-Din Tomb and the adjoining shops, and did not even mention the rest of the terrain. The mayor's conclusion ought to have been that the disputed land

was never and is not now a *Waqf* land; that the Muslims in town never claimed it to be *Waqf* until the dispute broke out; and therefore the declaration of that land as *Waqf* was no more than a subterfuge to mobilize the Muslims of Nazareth and allow the Islamists to take over the city.

The Islamists' Narrative

Is it significant that the Islamists' point of view, as put forward by Abu-Ahmed, the head of the majority in the city council, had been concocted between him and some members of the Commission. In fact, in addition to his single appearance before the Commission, Abu-Ahmed wrote on 14 July 1999 a long memorandum, backed by documents, in which he detailed his claims and expectations. In the preamble to his paper, which he addressed to the Chairman of the Commission, he wrote:

I am hereby submitting to you this memorandum about the unfolding of the Shihab-a-Din affair in response to the request advanced by Mr Gad Aviner [a member of the Commission], and following our meetings and discussions regarding your proposals on how to resolve the deadlock in the city and allow its operation by establishing a coalition between the The United Nazareth List [the Islamists] and the Democratic Front List [the Communists].¹

For Abu-Ahmed the entire affair began in mid-December 1997 when 'the city, led by its mayor, Jeraysi, decided to destroy the old structure [the school], and carried out the work at night'.² Thereupon, the city began implementing its plans to build the city square in close proximity to the Tomb of Shihab-a-Din, 'the nephew of Saladin who had fought the Crusaders and expelled them from the country and the entire area'.³ In the agony that Nazareth had been undergoing, those were hardly the terms of reconciliation needed to appease the minds of the frightened Christians; to remind them of their defeat by Islam in years past could not exactly calm them down. He affirmed that he and Abu Nawwaf, the Head of the Nazareth *Waqf* Board, had founded together the local Committee for the Defense of the *Waqf*, and in that capacity they had asked to see the mayor and impress on him the need to desist from his plans. Since the mayor had refused to accept the *Waqf* Committee's proposal, a tent was built on the plaza for both protest and prayer. But in the same memorandum, Abu-Ahmed confirmed that his *Waqf* Committee had been opposed to the destruction of the old school, which if true would mean that the primary motive of the Islamists was not to build their mosque, but to prevent the Christians, that is, the city, to proceed with the project of the city plaza, something that would have enhanced the Basilica and dwarfed the Shihab-a-Din Tomb.

According to Abu-Ahmed, all the Arab and Muslim mediators who had tried to settle the problem came to the conclusion that the land was *Waqf* (we shall deal with the efforts at mediation below). He accused the Israeli Vice-Minister for Religious Affairs, Yigal Bibi, of having succumbed to the pressures of Mayor Jeraysi and scuttled the mediation efforts which would have ended with the establishment of a mosque on the square. He was prepared to establish, together with the Israeli Northern District Commissioner, Yigal Shahr, a steering committee that would supervise the construction of the mosque on what 'assuredly was a *Waqf* land'.⁴ As a result of those negotiations, the plans for the mosque were elaborated and submitted to the Regional Urban Planning Commission. To add a catchy angle to the Islamists' claim, they now dubbed their project the 'Peace Mosque' and tried to play down its political significance. In fact, in a letter written by Attorney Shafir, on behalf of the Nazareth *Waqf*, he emphasizes that

his client is not a political movement, only a *Waqf* committee,⁵ at a time when Abu-Ahmed, the Head of the Islamists in Nazareth, and the driving force behind the Shihaba-Din affair, was Abu Nawwaf's co-founder of that committee. To press their case, the Islamists also hired the services of a Jewish law firm from Hadera, to replace the local Arab law office of Nazarene Aziz Shehadeh.

Abu-Ahmed recognized that the disputed land was registered as the property of the state of Israel.⁶ However, he claimed that like other *Waqf* lands which had been confiscated by Israel after 1948, the disputed terrain of 1,950 square meters had been entirely *Waqf*, and in the past a mosque had existed on that same spot. In his view, the history of the place as a Muslim site had begun long before the old school had been built. In fact, he said, the 'Tobler Map' of 1868 presented a layout of the various neighborhoods of Nazareth and showed a 'small mosque' on the site of the disputed square.⁷ Moreover, he claimed, the same map was reproduced in a later book published in the US,⁸ which confirmed the presence of that 'small mosque'. He also cited the Priest As'ad Mansur, who published in 1984 a book on Nazareth,⁹ where he allegedly confirmed that the 'school was within the limits of the mosque'; that is, the entire land surrounding the mosque belonged to it and had the same *Waqf* status as the mosque itself.¹⁰ Abu-Ahmed also cited a report by the *Waqf* Supervisor in Palestine, dated 28 April 1935, in which he stated that 'according to the Muslims in the city, the school was built by Muslims with Muslim money, and it contained a mosque and a *mihrab*. That report also claimed that the school was occupied by the [Mandatory] Government.'¹¹

There are some problems with Abu-Ahmed's sources, citations and interpretations, although one can certainly give him credit for believing in what he was claiming. The major problems raised by his memorandum are:

- The identification on the various maps of a 'small mosque', which is corroborated by the Muslims of the city in the 1930s, does not point to the existence of an independent mosque structure, but to a place of prayer, with a *mihrab*, which was perhaps a *musallah*, namely a place of prayer adjacent to the building of the school or, more probably, part of it.
- That school, as already pointed out before, had certainly been established by Muslims (the Ottoman authorities) with Muslim money (the budget of the Muslim Sultanate), but that did not make the school a mosque, much less a *Waqf* land.
- The identification of the school-building as 'Muslim' is erroneous, as Mansur's book says of it '*laysat khassa bü-Muslimirí*, which was conveniently translated by Abu-Ahmed as 'open to all students'; but it could also mean that it was not owned by the Muslims, though most of the students there were Muslim. While both translations are possible, the school referred to as being 'within the walls of the mosque'¹² is the school for girls, which is not identical with the school for Muslim boys described above. The author of the book simply stated that 'the girls had no school of their own, but they study in a private school inside the walls of the mosque',¹³ which might simply mean that girls' education was taken care of in some other place, the identity of which is not certain.
- The alleged 'occupation' of the school by the Mandatory Power in 1935 only confirms what Abu-Ahmed has himself recognized: that it was government property. This explains why that property remained registered as owned by the Israeli Government.
- Abu-Ahmed mentions the names of six great scholars of the Holy Law,¹⁴ who endorsed his

claims. None of them could visit the place (except for the Palestinian Mufti of Jerusalem; all the others were in either Damascus or Amman), and all of them would naturally side with Muslims. Besides, the Waqf register in Jerusalem does not support the Islamists' claim in Nazareth. Why would one lend credence to a group of outside scholars who have no way of knowing the facts, rather than local registers which do?

- At least in the cases of the Mufti of Jerusalem¹⁵ and the Mufti of Amman,¹⁶ who were supposed to know better than the others, they speak about a *musallah* and a *mihrab* (the niche that indicates the direction of prayer), as being part of the school which had been built by the Ottomans, and which was therefore made to accommodate Muslims in general. None of them talks of a mosque as a separate structure.
- The fact that these two fatwas were issued so soon after the Muslim invasion of the site (31 December 1997 and 5 January 1998, namely 10-15 days after the sit-in began), not only did not leave enough time for these venerable scholars to perform the 'extensive investigation' they pretend to have carried out, but clearly indicates a premeditated set-up.

The Dilemmas Facing the Commission

Faced with these contradictions, and in view of the establishment of the new Government of Israel in July 1999, the Commission began to sum up its findings. It was by then evident that the 'compromise' suggested by the previous government to the effect that 504 square meters would be ceded to the Islamists to build the mosque, much to the chagrin of the mayor and his team, was a non-starter for Abu-Ahmed and his group. They were so certain of their case, and so confident that the next government would yield more, that they kept pressing for more. Therefore, while one member of the Commission was entrusted with writing the summary of all evidence, the rest were busy attempting to come to another 'compromise' which would satisfy the Islamists. Thus, both the formal and informal tracks of the Commission's work speeded up, without keeping each other abreast of the developments. The efforts were geared to bringing about the renewed operation of City Hall in time to prepare for the millennium; and without an agreement on the issue of Shihab-a-Din, there was no way the municipality could resume its functions through collaboration between the rival parties.

To dig up the historical and other reasons at the root of the conflict, and to understand the motives of the parties, their passions, their jealousies and their interests, was not a very complex task. All it took was patience, listening, compassion, and a thorough investigation of relevant past and present events. The two major problems of the Commission were: how to settle the very deep existential dilemmas facing it, and in so doing fulfill its responsibility to the Israeli public; and how to present their findings convincingly to the politicians, although their minds were already made-up, so as to affect their decision-making in this affair. Thus, the 27-page draft report that was submitted to the members of the Commission in mid-July 1999, attempted to address itself to both aspects. Regarding the existential dilemmas, the draft report reflected the apparent dichotomies:

1. Is an *ad-hoc* 'solution' that would appease the tensions and the passions temporarily, necessarily better than a prolonged and painful solution which might hold the promise of a

- permanent settlement in the future?
2. Is it axiomatic that Israel is bound to always satisfy the Muslim majority among Israeli Arabs, or should it pay more attention to the Christian minority?
 3. Can Israel afford a creeping erosion in the norms of law enforcement, or should it move promptly to nip that evil in the bud?
 4. Can the State of Israel accept the misuse of democratic rule which had brought an entire city to paralysis, or should it move and take corrective moves in such cases?
 5. Are mediation, conciliation and compromise, which are resorted to in order to gain acceptance by rival parties, but which carry the potential of encouraging violent outbursts, necessarily preferable to a clear-cut legal verdict which leaves no doubts and will be durable?
 6. Should humane sentiment and compassion overrule the strictures of law, or must the rule of law be applied at all cost?
 7. Is not an early confrontation with the violators of law preferable to patience and tolerance, which might be interpreted as weakness in the legal system and encourage the law breakers to persist in their path until a major and more costly eruption happens?
 8. Is it not more practical to allow law-enforcement agencies to move in immediately and establish order, rather than deter them from firm intervention and erode their authority?
 9. Should urgent and inflammatory issues of public order wait in a long line in the court system, or could they be given the top priority before things become permanent and impossible to change?
 10. Is not long-term planning of a preventive nature preferable to emergency measures which must be applied when the authorities are not prepared for large-scale disturbances?
 11. Can the state afford that a violent group, which has used force to take the law into its own hands, be rewarded by making concessions to it?
 12. Can the state permit that an elected mayor be threatened and attacked, and must move around accompanied by bodyguards? What would happen if throughout the country elected officials were made to take care of their own security? Is the country interested in private armies or militias?
 13. Why does not the state interfere immediately, through the exercise of its legal power, to make sure that a city does function, instead of wasting time and expending vain efforts in never-ending compromises?
 14. Why did not the State of Israel, which was interested in the millennium festivities and the accruing masses of tourists and pilgrims, take the reins in its own hands, frustrate the schemes of those who are opposed to those events, and postpone the settlement of the problems of Nazareth until after 2000?
 15. Why has the State of Israel consistently failed to develop a policy toward its Arab minority? Worse, why does it let the relations between the Jewish majority and the Arab minority deteriorate?
 16. Why does the State of Israel disregard the mounting wave of Islamic fundamentalism in its midst and, instead of controlling it or cutting down its negative impact, on the contrary seeks, in vain, to accommodate it?

Very difficult questions indeed, which required quick and courageous decisions by the government. Therefore, the draft report suggested various options for consideration without pressing at that stage for any specific one, while emphasizing, however, the repercussions if any one were adopted:

1. To pursue the mediation efforts by the Commission – this option had naively assumed that all members of the Commission were committed to each other and to openness, sharing, thinking together, and lending priority to public interest; rather than being individual politicians who used the Commission each for his own purposes. This option was also predicated on the fact that the two rivals had submitted their positions in writing and their positions were well-known, but they did not seem to be bridgeable. It was reported to the Commission that both its Chairman and the Northern District Commissioner had insinuated to the mayor and to the Islamists that if they failed to settle their differences the Minister of the Interior would have to make the choice under law between dismantling the city council and calling for new elections, or appointing an executive board to manage city affairs until the completion of the legal term of the council. At that point, however, major differences remained to be ironed out in at least eight areas of dispute:
 - The Muslims were still insistent on erecting their mosque on 800 square meters of the disputed land, that is to say 300 square meters more than the concession made to them by the previous government.
 - One of the issues that the mediators raised was the appointment of an international board of architects who would consider various options for the development of the plaza and submit their recommendations to the local and regional Urban Planning Commissions. The Muslims feared that the board of architects might reject the idea of a mosque on the plaza, while at that time they still had in their hand a government offer for a 504-square meter house of prayer which they had rejected. This suggestion, which was put forward after the elections when both the Likud and the Shas parties had been disappointed by the Arab vote they had worked so hard to gain, might have been calculated to effectively bury the mosque project in the protracted and bureaucratic procedures of the Urban Planning Authorities. At the same time, however, this *démarche* would have scuttled the Nazareth 2000 plans and made the millennium festivities in the city impractical.
 - As regards the functioning of City Hall, it was suggested that the compromise forged by the Northern District Commissioner – to the effect that the Shihab-a-Din affair should be separated from the operation of City Hall – be accepted by the parties. In that case, all the outstanding matters would be raised and resolved in a politically balanced committee headed by an official of the Ministry of the Interior, which was bound to arrive at decisions only by consensus. The bone of contention here was that such a committee would enable each of its components to paralyze its operation at will, a situation that would be advantageous to the Islamists who could remain on the disputed land.
 - The mayor was vehemently opposed to any solution which did not bring the question of the *Waqf* status of the land to a final decision. For he feared that this would not only allow the open wound to fester, but that the illegal invasion of the Islamists would become a right of possession after a few years, and then no force would be strong enough to restore the previous *status quo*. He also feared that if the question was left to the committee, which would debate it for ever and remain unable to adopt any decision, violence may erupt again because the myth of the *Waqf* status of the disputed land would be entrenched and any attempt to reverse it by legal means would be encountered by force.

- The mayor was prepared to accept the proposal advanced by the Board of the Heads of Arab Councils (the ‘Committee of Seven’, which will be discussed below), to the effect that the *Waqf* Board of Nazareth ought to negotiate directly with the owner of the land, namely the State of Israel, on the construction of the mosque, without any interference by the municipality. He was aware that such a move would in fact lend a stamp of approval to the mosque, with only the questions of the size and the timetable remaining to be negotiated. However, he made his acceptance conditional on the immediate removal of the tent-mosque, while he himself was ready to pledge not to introduce any change to the plaza pending a settlement of the matter. The Commission felt that even if the Islamists should accept this proposal, it was not at all evident that the Government of Israel should adopt it in view of the irreparable damage that it would cause to the millennium celebrations. For the Islamists, this would have meant gaining time, with the plaza remaining empty, until they won the elections in the next term and then they could pass any resolution they wanted.
 - The mayor insisted that the status of the disputed land be resolved forthwith, because he was reluctant to be remembered in the history of the city as the ‘Christian Mayor who robbed Muslim *Waqf* I and’. Acting as a mayor on behalf of his party, and not as a representative of the Christians, he still preferred to have the court decide the status of the land (and he was certain that the court would decide in his favor), and plan the plaza thereafter, when doubts had been removed and that major controversy silenced.
 - The mayor remained adamant about not permitting the appointment of his senior deputy from among the Islamists, because of his suspicion that the latter would use his automatic majority to dictate measures that were not to the mayor’s liking. At the same time, Jeraysi was prepared to accept the appointment of two Islamist deputy mayors, with two assistants for each; but he rejected the Islamist plea for more political appointments, even if they were financed by the Ministry of the Interior (‘positions of trust’, a term coined by the Ministry of the Interior in its pre-election bid to bring the Islamists into the city coalition and win their favor).
 - The Commission felt at that point that even if the informal mediation efforts were to bear fruit, the remaining obstacles would be so numerous (for example, the committee and the status of the land), and so ridden with potential corruption (for example, the political appointments backed and financed by the state), that they would not stand the test of time.
2. To speed up the legal track – by pressing the court system, where the affair had been delayed for two years, to come to a conclusion regarding the status of the land under dispute or to order the evacuation of the illegal tent-mosque. There was hope that if the court system gave a pronouncement on the matter, the Islamists would have no choice but to accept its decision, and that might open up the way for their participation in city government and the solution of the impasse. If the Muslims were reluctant to accept such a court decision and incited their followers to rebel, then the government would be fully justified to move in, disband the city council, and take over the direct government of the city. Of course, if the Islamists had a legal case and won, the entire matter would be settled peacefully.
 3. The dissolution of the city council – this option was the last resort, because dissolution meant an admission that the democratic system did not work; and that might lead to dissatisfaction among the populace and the increase in violent confrontations between

Muslims and non-Muslims. The stakes were high: on the one hand, the government would be able to plan and execute the millennium ceremonies, evacuate the tent-mosque, build the plaza, and invite the Pope to participate; on the other hand, the frustrated Islamists might respond with violence of untold proportions. The dissolution of the city council could be followed by either of two measures:

- The appointment of a committee that would manage the city under government directives until the next local elections.
- New elections could be called in the knowledge that the Shihaba-Din issue would continue to dominate the election campaign, and that as a result violence might break out. In any case, it was likely that the Islamists would be able under these circumstances to increase their power in the city and might even have their candidate elected as mayor.

The Commission felt that the first option was preferable, because it was hoped that the appointed committee would be accepted by the rivals, once none of them had won the confrontation, and would calm the tensions and the passions until the year of the millennium had elapsed. Then, new elections could be organized in a much more peaceful atmosphere; and in light of the court decisions a new course of action could be chartered.

The Commission Vanishes

When the Commission undertook to write its final report, which was to be submitted to the new national government elected in May and constituted in July 1999, deep controversies surfaced. The Chairman and two members, namely those who had concocted a new ‘compromise’ to the liking of the Islamists apparently under the directives of the new government, were of the opinion that new concessions to the Islamists would bring the conflict to its end. Therefore, while they accepted the analysis and the conclusions of the draft report described above, they recommended that the mosque should be allowed to be built on a surface area of 750 square meters; feeling that thereby the municipality would be able to resume its function. They did not address themselves to the question of the legal status of the land, something that rightly infuriated the mayor. The new government promptly adopted these recommendations without waiting for the impending court decision or lending weight to the minority recommendations of one member of the Commission. They had apparently a political agenda of their own and they needed to fulfill it.

The minority recommendations, which were also circulated to all members of the new ministerial committee on Arab affairs, warned that approving the majority report would mean not only lending undue weight to the claims of the Islamists against all evidence, but also vindicating their aggressive behavior and signaling to them that violence and invasion of others’ property paid off. This sort of message is pregnant with grave dangers to Israel: the breaking of the law is accepted as the norm, and repercussions that might ensue in the future, as Islamist militants feel encouraged in their violent and secessionist ways. Worst of all, the minority report warned, the massive caving in of the Israeli Government also augured both the end of the Christian era in the politics of Israeli Arabs, and the disregard of their rights and minority status in the face of the mounting hegemony of the Islamists. That, in turn, would trigger worldwide resentment of Israel

by the Christian world and the Vatican, which might be harmful to the relations of Israel with the West and to its image in Western public opinion.

Indeed, days after the Government resolution in September 1999, the backlash began to hit Israel from all directions: on the day in November 1999 that the Islamists laid the cornerstone for their mosque, the Christians in Israel closed the doors of their churches in protest. The Vatican issued a strong reprimand to Israel, accusing it of causing the tensions between the various communities in Nazareth and Israel, and the Pope's visit to the Holy Land was put in doubt. The Christians in Israel were devastated by the decision of the Israeli Government; especially as in October 1999, the District Court of Nazareth had rejected all the Islamists' claims that had now been adopted by the Government, and had in fact vindicated the Christians' position as well as the minority report of the Commission (for details, see the following chapter). The State of Israel, after having made a number of uncalled-for concessions, ended up being shunned by the Christians, despised by the Islamists, and back to square one as far as the functioning of the Nazareth Municipality was concerned. Moreover, after ceding Bethlehem to the Palestinian Authority in 1995, and consenting to put the status of Jerusalem on the negotiating table during the upcoming permanent settlement talks, Israel also found itself acquiescing in turning the third Christian city of the Holy Land, Nazareth, into a Muslim holy place, as Shihab-a-Din became a new shrine after it acquired the characteristics of a *cause célèbre* during this conflict.

Notes

1 Abu-Ahmed, letter No. T/Q/32, dated 14 July 1999; hand-delivered to the Chairman of the Commission.

2 Ibid., p. 1.

3 Ibid.

4 See letter from Attorney Aziz Shehadeh, dated 3 March 1999, to Yigal Shahar, the Northern District Commissioner.

5 Letter from Attorney Shafir, No. V/1264-000-105, dated 19 February 1998, to the Northern District Commissioner.

6 Abu-Ahmed, Memorandum, p. 3.

7 Ibid., Document No. 14.

8 Chad Emmett, *Beyond the Basilica: Christians and Muslims in Nazareth. Geography Research Paper, No. 237* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, n.d.).

9 As'ad Mansur, *Tarikh a-Nasira, min aqdam ayyamiha ila ayyamina al-hadira [The History of Nazareth from Ancient Times to Our Days]* (Nazareth, 1984), p. 193.

10 See Abu Ahmed, Memorandum, p. 4.

11 Ibid.

12 Ibid.

13 Mansur, *Tarikh a-Nasira*, p. 193.

14 Abu Ahmed, Memorandum, p. 5.

15 Fatwa delivered by the Grand Mufti of Jerusalem, 'Akrama Sabri, on 31 December 1997.

16 Fatwa delivered by the Grand Mufti of the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan, Sa'id a'bd-al-Hafiz al-Hijawi, on 5 January 1998.

10.

The Legal Battle

The much underrated and ignored legal aspect of the Nazareth dispute ought to have suggested, in normal times and situations, the main course of action for all concerned. For, the Shihab-a-Din controversy was first of all a civil case between two parties claiming ownership of the same patch of land, an issue that only a court of law could settle. The issue also had a criminal aspect as civilians invaded property that was not theirs and refused to evacuate it, taking advantage of the sensitivity of the matter. The irony was that legal complaints were lodged after the onset of the affair and the slow wheels of justice began turning, but they were not allowed to run their course before action was taken. The fact that the Commission of Inquiry was set up and that informal efforts were made to settle the dispute out of court, at the very same time that the judicial system was handling the case, signaled to all concerned that the real settlement was to be sought elsewhere; and that in itself marginalized the court. Small wonder, then, that when the court finally pronounced its verdict, it was met with virtual apathy by the public and the media in Israel, while the drama of the violent clashes between the two communities in Nazareth occupied the headlines.

The Genesis of the Legal Struggle

In the early 1980s, when land claims were registered in Israel, the disputed terrain in Nazareth was claimed only by two bodies: the Government of Israel which had the title to that land as the inheritor of the Mandatary Power, and the Nazareth Municipality which operated the school that had occupied that piece of land. Neither of these two bodies had claimed ownership of the two *Waqf* assets in the vicinity of the school (the Tomb and the stores), because they had both been registered as the property of the Development Authority which had temporarily taken over all *Waqf* assets of the departed Arabs in 1948. As explained above, after the reform of 1965, the *Waqf* assets were transferred to the local *Waqf* Boards all over Israel, including Nazareth with the Shihab-a-Din compound (Tomb and shops) accruing to it. In fact, as late as 1985, when the land settlements were finalized, the *Waqf* Board of Nazareth only claimed ownership of the two small plots of the Tomb and the shops, which were indeed transferred to it, and at no time raised the issue of the rest of the disputed land.

In 1983, and in accordance with the land settlement in process, the government, via its Land Authority, decided to transfer the school at the foot of the Basilica of the Annunciation to the ownership of the municipality, but refused to include in the deal the land itself, unless the city paid for it according to its value which was appraised at IS1.5 million. This agreement, which received the backing of a court of law, decreed, by the pen of Judge Zu'bi of Nazareth, that the

deal had the force of a judgment¹ and obligated both parties. A provision was made, however, that the land in question was earmarked for public use only, and that if its use were altered the ownership over it would revert to the state.² But, it turned out that the Nazareth Municipality could not raise the necessary sum to pay for the land and therefore the deal could not be carried through. Interestingly enough, it was the Islamists in the municipality, who were then in the minority, who pressed the mayor (then Tufiq Zyad) to pay the government in order to complete the deal. Maybe they thought that, since the Muslims already then constituted the majority in the city, they could press for the use of the land as a site for the mosque which they had in mind. In any case, the fact that they insisted on the purchase, without raising any doubts about its ownership, more than shows that they did not lay any claim to it.

Had the municipality heeded the Muslim appeal to buy the land, there would have been no case for any disagreement between the municipality and the government, as long as the land was put to public use (including the building of a mosque, if so decided). Urban planning questions may have been raised if the municipality had, for example, approved a plan to build a major mosque on the site, but the regional Urban Planning Commission had disapproved of it. However, the city finally decided that it did not have the money to expend on that place, and the Land Authority declared that it would keep it under government ownership, though it was ready to rent it out to the municipality for public use. One can assume that the municipality's failure to purchase the land stemmed both from its dearth of funds, and also from its realization that once the land came under its ownership, it would have felt compelled to respond to the pressures of the Muslim majority and agree to the building of the mosque. It was much easier for City Hall to blame lack of funds than confront the emotions that its refusal to build a mosque on that site would have occasioned.

Salvation came to the municipality in the 1990s when the Nazareth 2000 project was initiated, and it was clear to all that the land adjacent to the Basilica would be used for the city plaza. Only after the school was destroyed to make way for the plaza did the Islamists begin to advance the claim that the site was a holy place, because the destroyed structure had included a prayer place (*musalla*), an issue discussed in the previous chapter. The Land Authority rejected that plea, arguing that had this been the case, the Muslims should have raised their objection to the destruction of the school before or during the demolition work. According to the Land Authority, it had agreed to the demolition only in order to facilitate the plaza project under the Nazareth 2000 plan. Had it received an application to build a mosque on the plaza, it might have considered or allocated land elsewhere in the city. But now the Land Authority staunchly opposed that proposition as a mosque, or city hall, or any other central structure on that sensitive spot, would have irretrievably clogged the traffic flow on the main artery adjacent to the plaza, and only an open square for pedestrians would have somewhat relieved the traffic problems.

The First Round in Court

When the land was encroached upon on 21 December 1997, and the tent was erected, the Land Authority refrained from complaining against the violation of its property rights as it was sensitive to the approaching holy periods of Ramadan for the Muslims and Christmas for the Christians. Although the municipality complained to the police at the end of December, the latter also decided not to act, and elected to refrain from the use of force to allow passions to cool. It is

difficult to visualize this sort of joint soft reaction by two ministries in the Israeli government (Domestic Security which commanded the police, and National Infrastructure which directed the Land Authority), unless one assumes that a cabinet decision to relent was at the root of both. The police had refrained from acting promptly to remove the invaders because of the strident attacks against it by leaders of Israeli Arabs, backed by the Israeli media, who had accused the police officers of brutality and excess use of force in Umm-al-Fahm a short time previously. When faced with the reality of lack of public support when they enforced the law under duress and considerable risk, it is understandable that the police were not eager to act once again in a difficult situation that would only draw criticism and scorn down on it.

However, the Regional Urban Planning Commission sued the invaders, asked the court to order the evacuation of the land, and itself issued on 6 April 1998 an order to demolish the tent that had been illegally erected.³ The Land Authority also sued the Islamists for invading its property and asked the court to order their removal.⁴ The Islamic *Waqf* Board of Nazareth, headed by Abu Nawwaf and represented by Attorney Shafir, also petitioned the court to abolish the demolition and removal orders issued by the Planning Commission and the Land Authority. At that point, the mayor, who dreaded the possibility of alienating the majority of his citizenry if he persisted in his complaint, or if he sued the invaders in court, was happy to pass the hot potato to these two government agencies and to wait on the sidelines. Judge Dina Moyal of the Nazareth Court issued her verdict on 23 April 1998,⁵ according to which:

- The administrative order to demolish the temporary tent could not stand on technical grounds, because the Planning Commission did not implement its duty to consult with the Ministry of Justice as required by law.⁶
- The tent was temporary in nature and therefore could not be considered a *fait accompli*, especially as the defendants had duly submitted a formal petition to the Planning Commission to build a mosque; which in itself, was an indication that the tent was not intended to be permanent.⁷

Judge Moyal also addressed herself to the issue of the removal of the invaders as requested by the Land Authority, in the face of the Islamists counter-claim that they did not constitute 'invaders' according to the wording of the law, as they were on the land for prayer and not in order to squat illegally. The defendants also claimed that according to the Order-in-Council of 1924, under which the Mandatary Power had delegated disputes of a religious nature to the government rather than to the judicial system, the whole affair ought to be handled by the Minister for Religious Affairs. In her verdict, based on several precedents from Israel's Supreme Court, the judge therefore decreed:⁸

- Although no conclusive proof had been provided by the Islamists to back the claim of sanctity for the area under dispute, enough material was submitted to the court as to raise a question mark about its status. Therefore, this matter, following the 1924 Order-in-Council, had to be forwarded to the Minister of Religious Affairs for decision.⁹
- The claim of the Islamists that they did not erect their tent in protest, but only for the purpose of prayer, sounded credible enough to put aside the threat of evacuation from the invaded land until the questions of ownership and sanctity were resolved.¹⁰ [The judge did

not address herself to Abu-Ahmed's own admission that the 'tent had been erected by the Muslims in protest against the behavior of Mayor Jeraysi'.¹¹ Nor did the judge see the petition which had been submitted to the High Court of Justice on 5 May 1998, by the same Attorney Shafir, who represented the *Waqf* at the Nazareth Court, in which he expressly declared. 'After the school was destroyed, many Muslims arrived on the spot and erected a tent for prayer and protest against the Nazareth municipality plan to build a public square there.'^{12]}

- The asset under dispute seemed to be *Waqf* though the matter needed further investigation, therefore the feelings of those who believed in the eternity of its sanctity could not be ignored.¹³
- Although under normal circumstances, the court would order a reversion to the previous *status quo* until the matter was finally clarified, in this case there was no point in ordering the removal of the invaders from the land, since it was not the defendant himself who occupied the land but a group of unspecified people who were praying there, and whose relation to the defendant was not proven.¹⁴
- Only if and when the Minister of Religious Affairs determined the religious status of the land, could the court of law resume deliberations regarding the claim of ownership over it.¹⁵
- Until that happened, the court refused to cancel its order to suspend the order of removal issued by the Land Authority.¹⁶

Both the Land Authority and the Planning Commission decided to appeal immediately to the District Court; but, in response to the president of the court's proposal to the parties to end the controversy by a procedure of mediation and the agreement of all sides, a team of three judges was appointed, including Judge Moyal, Judge Nehama Monitz and Judge Abraham Abraham. Mediation sessions took several months, in which various ideas for compromise were raised, including a joint project for a mosque and public plaza. The Islamists saw in the procedure an opportunity to basically get what they wanted, but the mayor – who acted behind the scenes and carried the other parties to the proceedings with him – loathed the prospect of letting the invaders have their way, and encouraged opposition to that scheme. In the beginning of 1999, as tempers were on the rise again following the local elections results of November 1998 and various attempts by Arab political and religious leaders to interfere in the affair, mediation came to an end. On 16 February 1999, the State Attorney General petitioned the Nazareth Court to desist from mediation efforts, on the grounds that the invaders had illegally and unprofessionally connected their tent to the electric grid – which posed a threat to the visitors and to public safety – and that they had reinforced the 'temporary' tent with concrete walls.¹⁷ The State Attorney regarded these developments as a break in the faith which was at the root of the mediation efforts under the auspices of the Court.¹⁸

The State Attorney also asked the court of law to resume its judicial proceedings with a view to decreeing the demolition of the tent.¹⁹ The mayor, who had accepted the mediation in order not to have to confront his fellow Nazarenes in court, had been in favor during those proceedings, of building a small structure that would not hamper the open plaza project, and would be a symbolic reflection of the three monotheistic faiths. He continued to oppose the building of a mosque, but was prepared to allow the refurbishing of the Shihab-a-Din Tomb: 'in accordance with the city's plans and in conformity with the city's intention to build a city square there'.²⁰ The mayor wanted to publicly emphasize that he was not a party to the controversy

which had pitted the Nazareth *Waqf* Board against the Land Authority, and therefore he did not think it useful to appear before the court.²¹

Legal Sidetracks

At the same time as the legal battles in the Nazareth Court, the mayor and the *Waqf* Board agreed to put together a ‘popular commission’ that would intercede between the rivals in order to settle the controversy out of court, and whose decisions would be binding on both parties. Each side appointed one representative to the commission which was to be headed by the President of the Islamic Court of Appeal, Ahmed Natur of Qalansawa, whose integrity and reputation made him acceptable to the contenders. However, due to his public office, special permission for his appointment was sought by the Chairman of the Committee of the Heads of Arab Councils (CHAC) in Israel, Mr Ibrahim Nimr Hussein, from the Deputy Minister in charge of Religious Affairs, Mr Yigal Bibi.²² After considerable hesitation, due to the fear that the impeccable record of the venerable Qadi might be soiled by his interference in the controversy, the Deputy Minister consented to make an exception to the rule and allow him to head the commission.²³ However, in view of the fact that the whole affair was referred to the court in February 1998, the Deputy Minister retracted his previous decision on 15 April 1998, arguing that an Israeli official could not be involved in a *sub-judice* issue.²⁴

This reversal, which could not be defied or resisted by Natur, in fact pronounced the death sentence of the ‘popular commission’ – whose proceedings were in full swing – and brought its work to a close.²⁵ The Nazareth *Waqf* Board appealed to the Deputy Minister, arguing that since there was no legal contention between the mayor and the *Waqf*, the former being no part of the court proceedings, this case could not be classified as *sub judice*. Moreover, the *Waqf* Board argued, the ‘popular commission’ was not a legal procedure in itself, and therefore there was no contradiction between its awaited ruling and the pending decision of the court, and no reason for the Deputy Minister to abrogate his previously accorded permission to proceed. The *Waqf* Board invoked ‘political motives’, in favor of the mayor, behind Bibi’s decision.²⁶ Since the *Waqf* Board’s plea remained unheeded, its representative, Attorney Shafrir, petitioned the High Court of Justice to rule against the Deputy Minister.²⁷ In the mean time, however, the Nazareth court issued its ruling on 23 April, temporarily upholding the *Waqf* Board’s position until the Minister of Religious Affairs issued a decision regarding the sanctity of the land under dispute. In view of this ruling, argued Shafrir, the designation of this case as *sub judice* was no longer valid.²⁸

Therefore, the *Waqf* Board which knew, according to its lawyer, that the ruling of the ‘popular commission’ would be in its favor,²⁹ asked the High Court to order the minister in charge to remove his prohibition on Natur from pronouncing his judgement. Interestingly enough, Natur himself was added to the petition as a defendant, as the *Waqf* Board wanted him to be ordered by the court to announce his ruling.³⁰ Ultimately, upon the suggestion of Justice Heshin who reviewed the case, Shafrir retracted his petition in order not to push Natur into an impossible position. The only explanation for this turn of events is that, in those days when the Islamists were a minority on the city council and the mayor was at the height of his popularity, the Abu-Ahmed group knew that Natur was their best chance for implementing their plans for building the mosque on the disputed square. But, after the local elections of 1998, when the Islamists

changed the balance of the city council, and especially on the eve of the national elections of 1999, when they were courted by all sides, the position of the Abu-Ahmed supporters hardened and their demands grew more insistent.

In the face of the intransigence of the Islamists, who after their election victory had reinforced and expanded the tents and awnings they had illegally erected in the plaza, the courts were asked to begin the proceedings again. The deadlock caused the mounting of tensions in the city which erupted into violence at Easter (April 1999) and triggered the intervention of the CHAC, which appointed a 'Committee of Seven', including the leader of the Communist Party, Muhammed Barakeh, to try to reach an agreed outcome. This committee proclaimed that the mayor would not object to 'whatever is agreed between the *Waqf* and the government'.³¹ While this proclamation will be fully analyzed in the next chapter, one item relevant to our discussion here must be mentioned. The Memorandum that Abu-Ahmed submitted to the Commission of Inquiry misquoted the proclamation as saying that the 'Mayor shall not object to the construction of the mosque as will be agreed between the *Waqf* and the government'.³² These were the days preceding the Israeli national elections when promises and deals were concocted behind the scenes. The Islamists must have felt that the pledges made to them by the major parties regarding their plea for a mosque would be answered satisfactorily; and in fact the Likkud Government had already conceded to them a 504-square meter mosque, upon which they hoped to improve. But the mayor, under pressure from the head of his own party, and not wishing to seem too intransigent in the face of the Islamists' readiness to 'compromise', only yielded to the general formula of 'whatever is agreed' without specifying a mosque. He must have been confident either of the continued support of the Israeli government for his position, or that the final verdict of the courts, now once more in motion, would vindicate him in the end.

After the national elections had run their course and the new government was installed – which through its governmental committee decided to grant the Islamists the 750-square meter mosque they had coveted – it was the turn of the court system to speak. The verdict of the district court, issued by President Abramovic and Judges Ben-David and Maman on 3 October 1999,³³ decreed:

- The appeal was accepted by the Court and the defendant was obligated to pay the appeal expenditures, and the case would be returned to the Nazareth Court for substantive hearings.
- The question of the sanctity of the disputed land was not a 'real issue' and there was not even a reasonable doubt over whether this was a real issue, as the land in question clearly belonged to the state. Even had the *Waqf* Board proved that it had rights to the land, that in itself did not make the land holy in any sense of the word, because the *Waqf* Board often deals with secular assets.³⁴
- When the school was being demolished to make way for the plaza, and the land stood in desolation before the debris was cleared, for several months, the Muslims in town did not protest. This would not have happened if any one knew of, or thought or claimed there was, any sanctity attached to that place. In fact, said the court, it was only when the Muslims realized that the city square project was under way that they started squatting on the grounds and praying there, and in consequence claiming that it was a holy site.³⁵
- The court determined, therefore, that the religious designation of that place was only a recent development, triggered by the inter-communal struggle in the city and had nothing to do with *Waqf* or sanctity. In any case, if the school building which previously existed, and

was claimed to have been holy, was no longer there, then its alleged sanctity had disappeared with the building.³⁶

- The mosque that the defendants claimed to have existed on the disputed land, was in fact identical to the Shihab-a-Din Tomb; which would not be threatened by the building of the square, but, on the contrary, would be refurbished.³⁷
- Since the above facts were clear, there was no need to refer the question of the sanctity of the site to the Minister for Religious Affairs in the first instance. Based on a precedent established in Supreme Court by Justice Barak, there was never any question of doubt about this matter.³⁸

This seminal verdict cut the ground from under the claims of the Islamists, but the Government's decision to give way had already been announced. It became clear, however, that the Commission of Inquiry's findings and minority recommendations, which had been reached independently and before the courts, had been vindicated, in spite of the fact that the Government did not heed them. But the legal proceedings did not end there, although the Land Authority understandably desisted from pursuing a legal suit in the Nazareth Court following the verdict of the district court. The Urban Planning Commission had, for its part, pressed the case for the demolition of the reinforced tent and awnings once the Nazareth Court's attempts at mediation had been discontinued.

However, as the same judges who were to hear the case also sat on the mediation team, they disqualified themselves and had the hearings transferred to the Tiberias Court. Judge Ron Shapira decreed on 25 October 1999:³⁹

- That the tent and the awnings around it should be demolished, for there was no disagreement between the parties that they had been illegally built, as they required a permit from the Urban Planning Authorities to be legal. In fact, the judge said, when the defendant did submit a claim to a legal right to build the tent, he had effectively given up his 'rights'.⁴⁰
- The defendant had claimed that he had found human bones on the grounds of the disputed land, which proved to him the previous existence of an old Muslim cemetery on that site, hence the sanctity of the site. But no evidence was provided that these were indeed human bones and, if so, bones of Muslims. But even if it were proved that a Muslim cemetery had existed in the past in that place, this would not mean that it was a holy site, as until recently a school had been functioning on the same spot and no one had raised any objections to that.⁴¹
- Even if the place had been holy, there would have been no need to refer the matter to the Minister for Religious Affairs as, in the British Order-in-Council of 1924 – which was invoked by the defendant – an exception was made for a criminal act that had been perpetrated on the site, for which the Order-in-Council did not provide protection. Illegal building on public land was in this category of criminal offense.⁴²
- Any building that had been built illegally had to be demolished, out of concern for the principle that violators of law should not be rewarded. The argument of the defendant – that the tent provided shelter to the worshippers who flocked to the site to pray, and that its removal would constitute a violation to their freedom of worship – had to be rejected. For the building of places of worship had also to be carried out in accordance with the law,

which protects everybody equally, including worshippers of all faiths.⁴³

- The defendants could not hide behind their claim that a governmental committee, headed by the Minister for Internal Security (Ben-Ami), and consisting of Ministers Ramon, Sharansky, Vilna'i, and Lipkin-Shahak,⁴⁴ had accorded them the right to build a mosque on that site. Even though the judge abstained from expressing any opinion on the decision of that ministerial panel (in itself an oblique criticism of it), he insisted that it did not alter his reasoning and verdict. He said, however, that the: 'ministerial committee had no authority, nor did it pretend to accrue to itself such an authority, to legalize a crime that had been perpetrated, or to ignore the law'.⁴⁵ He also quoted Article VIII of the Resolution of the Ministerial Committee which stated explicitly that the 'cornerstone-laying ceremony was set for 8 November 1999, in the presence of government ministers ...', and that, 'prior to that date the tent will be dismantled and all structures and objects removed from it'.⁴⁶
- The defendant's attempt to convince the court to take into consideration the Ministerial Committee's resolution, on the one hand, but, on the other, undermine it by allowing the tent to stand, only showed his lack of good faith and proved that he was not being open when he came to ask for justice.⁴⁷
- Those who petition the court to protect their freedom of worship, cannot at the same time act in contravention of others' rights of worship. It should be taken into account that the square was conceived to facilitate the access of Christian pilgrims to the Basilica of the Annunciation, while at the same time refurbishing, not damaging, the Shihab-a-Din Tomb.⁴⁸
- The court only refrained from ordering the demolition and evacuation of the tent-mosque prior to the date decreed by the Ministerial Committee out of due respect to the executive branch of government. If the defendants failed to demolish the tent-mosque, then the Urban Planning Commission would itself be entitled to do so*⁴⁹
- To show his displeasure with the defendant, the judge ordered him to pay the cost of the proceedings (IS15,000).⁵⁰

This rare blast at the government and its reasoning, and the sound defeat of all the arguments advanced by the Islamists, threw a rather gloomy cloud over the executive branch of power in Israel which, for its own inexplicable reasons, took all the possible wrong decisions based on all the possible wrong conclusions, that were based on all the possible wrong data. A panoply of varying arguments had been advanced to the various sessions of the court to justify the illegal deeds of the *Waqf* Board, in an effort to explore all possible avenues of defence, according to the best tradition of court pleading, where the only limits are those set by the lawyer's imagination; but they had been rejected by the judges. The sad conclusion of this chapter remains that the same government that had committed itself to the rule of law, did not await the verdict of the district court; nor did it heed the minority findings and recommendations presented to it, both of which could have, incidentally, also given it an honorable way out of the conflict, and a solid and credible shield to hide behind that no one could have contested.

But the Government had its own agenda, as explained in the previous chapters; or it simply blundered when under pressure – which made the court decisions not only redundant but also laughable, because when finally the legal truth came out, the Government's mind had already been made up. It would have been interesting to test the judiciary system if a third round of the legal battle had been triggered by a petition to the High Court of Justice asking it to force the Government to act in accordance with the findings of the district court, and to show cause why it

had behaved differently without waiting for the outcome of a process it had itself initiated.⁵¹ It is a sign of the government's belated repentance that not one of its ministers was present in the ceremony for the laying of the cornerstone, in spite of its solemn declaration that there would be. The day of that ceremony was a time for the Islamists to celebrate both their undue victory and their successful manipulation of two successive Israeli governments; it was also a day of agony for the Christians who watched from the insides of their churches which had been closed down in protest. The Government of Israel had given in, the Islamists rejoiced, and the Christian dream for the Holy Land was shattered to pieces.

Notes

1 Court Judgement No. 9/82, given at the Nazareth District Court by Judge 'abd-a- Rahman Zu'bi, 7 October 1983.

2 Ibid.

3 This order was issued on 6 April 1998, by the Regional Urban Planning Commission, based on Article 238a of the Law on Planning and Construction (1965). The order was signed by Yigal Shahar, the Northern District Commissioner, who was also *ex-officio* Chairman of the Regional Planning Commission. The demolition order specified that the illegally built tent covered an area of 150 square meters.

4 The petition of the Land Authority was based on the Law on Removal of Invaders from Public Land (1981).

5 B.S. 1172/98, dated 23 April 1998.

6 Ibid., pp. 16-17.

7 Ibid., pp. 18-19.

8 B.S. 1173/98, dated 23 April 1998.

9 Ibid., p. 20.

10 Ibid., p. 21.

11 Abu-Ahmed, 'Memorandum', p. 5.

12 High Court of Justice Petition, No. 2777/98, dated 5 July 1998: the Islamic *Waqf* Board of Nazareth vs the Minister of Religious Affairs, Article V, p. 2.

13 B.S. 1173/98, p. 21.

14 Ibid., p. 22.

15 Ibid.

16 Ibid., p. 23.

17 The Attorney General vs Abu Nawwaf and the Land Authority, B.S. 1788-98, dated 16 February 1999. Brought before the mediating team of judges at the Nazareth Court.

18 Ibid.

19 Ibid.

20 The petition by Attorney M. Ibrahim, on behalf of the Mayor to the Nazareth Court, dated 26 January 1999, in response to the summons of the Court to be present at the continuation of the proceedings.

21 Ibid.

22 See the letter from Nimr Hussein, dated 13 January 1998, to Deputy Minister Bibi.

23 See the letter from Deputy Minister Bibi, No. 1368, dated 19 January 1998, to Attorney Walid Fahum of Nazareth.

24 Letter from Deputy Minister Bibi, No. 1618, dated 15 April 1998, to Qadi Ahmed Natur.

25 Letter from Attorney Shafirir, No. 1321-000-114/V, dated 22 April 1998, on behalf of the Nazareth *Waqf* to Deputy Minister Bibi.

26 Ibid., p. 2.

- 27 High Court of Justice Document No. 2777/98, dated 5 May 1998.
- 28 Ibid.
- 29 Ibid., Article XXIV, p. 4.
- 30 High Court of Justice Document No. 2777/98, dated 5 May 1998.
- 31 See the proclamation (in Arabic), Article II; released in Nazareth on 5 April 1999.
- 32 See Ahmed, 'Memorandum', Article V, p. 5.
- 33 Nazareth District Court Document No. 000185/98, dated 3 October 1999.
- 34 Ibid., p. 18.
- 35 Ibid.
- 36 Ibid., p. 19.
- 37 Ibid., pp. 19-20.
- 38 Ibid.
- 39 Tiberias Court Document No. 001206/99, dated 25 October 1999.
- 40 Ibid., p. 11.
- 41 Ibid., p. 15.
- 42 Ibid., pp. 16-20. Based on a precedent set by Justice Aharon Barak.
- 43 Ibid., pp. 21-2.
- 44 Respectively, the Ministers of Jerusalem Affairs, the Interior, Science and Culture, and Tourism.
- 45 Tiberias 001206/99, pp. 22-3.
- 46 Ibid.
- 47 Ibid., p. 23.
- 48 Ibid., pp. 23-4.
- 49 Ibid., p. 25.
- 50 Ibid.
- 51 In the event, nobody sued the Government, as no mosque has been erected. The building work has been arrested for the time being by opposition from the Vatican and President Bush.

11.

Intra-Arab Politics

It seems that the main casualty of the Nazareth controversy has been the Arab community itself, as it emerged from this test fragmented and splintered, its leaders disoriented and helpless. The heyday of the Communist Party – when it knew how to provide umbrella slogans which united communists and nationalists, Christians and Muslims – is long gone; as are the days of towering figures like Tufiq Zyad, who commanded enough authority to pull together all these elements of Arab society in Israel. Personal politics, to a large extent due to the direct elections of mayors, have disrupted traditional party or clan politics, and justified harsh political campaigning in terms of individual gain, job appointments, greed for power, personal and clan jealousies, and the settling of account. If at the outset of the crisis the appearance of unity among the Arabs seemed to triumph, due to the attempt of all participants to contain the dispute and resolve it within the family as had been their wont in the past, the escalation of the rift cut deeper and deeper into the facade of unity as the months wore on, until an unprecedented and apparently irreparable polarization set in.

The Eve of the Crisis

In the mid-1990s great changes were evident in the political sympathies of the Arabs in Israel. Not only had the Communists lost their dominance over the minds of the Arabs, with the Islamists rising in their stead, but the very signature of the Oslo Accords at the end of 1993 had pushed aside the main issue of peace with the Palestinians which had been at the top of the Arab agenda in Israel. Hopes were high then that a rapid negotiation process would produce a stable peace which would resolve the question of identity among Israeli Arabs that was lingering as long as their country was at war with their people. In this situation, they thought, the issue of equality within Israeli society would remain as the main focus of the struggle of the Arab parties.¹ What was hard to predict, however, was the toll that the shift in focus would take on Israeli Arabs. For, if the Palestinian issue was a mobilizing and unifying one, a consensus from which no one dared to distance himself lest he be accused of deviation, collaboration or outright treason, the issue of equality proved more divisive than unifying.

Equality turned out to be more problematic than it was thought when it moved from the level of a slogan to the nitty-gritty of individual, regional, clan, communal and local politics. For, inherent in the word 'equality', was a wide range of meanings which were adopted by individuals, parties and groups who scrambled for an 'equality' that meant many things to many people. Some thought that equality meant setting themselves apart as a separate national group which would in fact turn Israel into a bi-national state; others asked for mere cultural autonomy

For others, Islamic identity took precedence over the Palestinian one. And, for all, equality meant actually establishing a new privileged class which could claim its rights but continue to shun duties – such as military or any other form of national service – in their embattled country. Some turned to the support of the Jewish-Zionist parties, seeing them as their best chance for Israelization; others continued to question the very right of Israel to an independent Jewish state and demanded that it shed its Jewish symbols with which they could not identify. All this, coupled with the politics of direct elections in local councils and municipalities, tended to create such a variety and such a number of splinter groups, as to scuttle any attempts at unity.

The Islamic identity was grafted onto all this; which seemed not only to fill the vacuum that had been created by the passing of several groups into history (like the Progressive List for Peace), or the diminution of the Communist appeal, but also to provide a new umbrella under which Muslim Arabs could unite. For, unlike the communists in their various metamorphoses, who had provided a shelter for both Muslims and Christians, and encouraged both to be a-religious, the Islamist slogans by definition mobilized Muslims exclusively and constituted the new rallying point for the Muslim majority. This was dramatically shown in Nazareth, the bastion of the Communists and the last vestige of Christian power, where six parties, composed of Muslims,² heeded the appeal of the Islamists and united with them under their leadership to form the Islamist group. Although the Islamists would win only 40 percent of the vote among the non-communist Muslims in the elections in Nazareth (four out of ten seats on the city council), they still provided an Islamist image by which the entire group has recognized itself ever since. Muslim identity was evidently strong enough to displace any other form of identity, both positively in terms of political rallying, and negatively in terms of unifying against Christian rule in the city. The Islamists could also show their strong appeal to all strata of Muslim society by placing in their Lists three engineers (two from the Islamic Party and one from the Shihab-a-Din group), one lawyer, one businessman, one government official, one social worker and one building contractor.

The Islamists' Attack

So, when the Islamists in Nazareth, under the facade of the local *Waqf* Board, went on the attack in late 1997, they had read the political signs correctly and understood the powerful appeal of Islam in their bid to oust the mayor and win over City Hall. Indeed, Shihaba-Din became the one test item that would make or break that carefully crafted strategy, and it was necessary to initiate it long enough before the elections to kindle the sentiments and step up the struggle prior to the elections. Their spectacular first successes, which snowballed in the face of the helplessness of both the local government and the Israeli authorities to stop their advance, made them look victorious and an increasingly safe bet for the future leadership of the city.

In early January 1998, the *Waqf* Board met a delegation of the notables representing Jeraysi at the home of Salim Has'has in Nazareth, and after protracted deliberations – which were specifically geared to containing the crisis and dealing with it 'within the family' – an agreement was ironed out to set up an internal Committee of Inquiry to establish whether the disputed patch of land was indeed *Waqf* as the Islamists claimed. Significantly, Salman Abu-Ahmed, the Head of the Islamists in Nazareth was to represent the *Waqf* Board on that committee, while Attorney Walid Fahum was to act as the delegate of the mayor. Since it was a *Waqf* affair under

discussion, the parties agreed that the well-known and widely respected President of the Muslim Court of Appeal, the Qadi Ahmed Natur of Qalansawa, would head the committee, and in fact be the decisive voice in it.³ Ibrahim Hussein (CHAC), who was the driving spirit behind the Committee of Inquiry, also undertook to write to the Deputy Minister for Religious Affairs⁴ and ask for permission for Natur (a state civil servant in his capacity as Shar'ia judge) to serve as its Head. The fortunes of that Committee of Inquiry have been explained in the previous chapter, when the Deputy Minister for Religious Affairs prohibited Natur from delivering his verdict, which was to be, according to the *Waqf* Board of Nazareth, clearly in their favor.⁵ In any case, although Natur rejected the Deputy Minister's claim that the case was *sub judice*, as a reason for his prohibition on pursuing the proceedings of the committee,⁶ and though he attacked the mayor's representative on the committee, Attorney Fahum for raising that question belatedly, he had no choice but to stop short of declaring his verdict, thus bringing this episode to rest.

The Nazareth media widely reported the disruption of the 'Committee of Three', which had been accepted by the parties and was thought to be the fairest informal resolution to the conflict. Ibrahim Nimr Hussein (CHAC), the driving force behind that attempt at mediation, admitted in an interview that he had been called one night to the home of Sheikh Natur – in the presence of Professor Hajj, Sheikh Ra'id of Umm al-Fahm, Sheikh Kamal Ryan of Kafr Bara, and Abu-Ahmed of Nazareth – when all these Islamists exerted pressure on Natur to issue his verdict but he refused, due to the prohibition imposed on him by the Ministry for Religious Affairs. When asked why he refused the Islamists' request that he should publish Natur's verdict in his name, he said that since the 'Committee of Three' was to issue, in writing, a resolution after examining the relevant documents and listening to the counterarguments of the municipality (something that was not done), there was nothing for the Committee but to announce its own dissolution.⁷

On 16 January, and without waiting for the completion of the proceedings of the internal Committee of Inquiry, the *Waqf* Board issued a manifesto to the inhabitants of Nazareth calling upon them to take part in the mass participation at the 'Id-al-Fitr Festival prayer services at the Shihab-a-Din Plaza, on the grounds of the disputed land. In anticipation of a court verdict, following the law suits lodged against the *Waqf* Board for invading the disputed land, the manifesto boasted that 'the Shar'i proofs are conclusive regarding the *Waqf* status of the Shihab-a-Din complex', and that 'the Shar'i fatwas, based on the great Muslim scholars, are of a superior quality to any verdict issued by a court of law, because a fatwa deals with principles of a general nature while the court verdict only obligates the litigating individuals and no one else'. The manifesto also accused the Municipality of Nazareth of using violence against the Muslims and using the cover of the police and the Land Authority to incite violence against the Muslims and their holy places.

The Islamists also stepped up their attacks against the Christians in the Arabic press in Israel. *Sawt al-Haqq wal-Huriyya* joined the fray by suggesting that:

The Municipality of Nazareth is upset because the Islamists' demands touch upon the most sensitive spot of the Nazareth 2000 Project, and that building a park [it meant a public plaza] on that spot would constitute issuing a definitive [Christian] identity card to the city of Nazareth. A source in City Hall confirmed that blocking the public park project would bring an end to the Nazareth 2000 Project which would then become a body without a soul.⁸

In this situation, the Christian-secular *al-Sinara*, called all parties to reason, and urged the Muslims to realize that their claims were countered by other findings, and that the City of Nazareth was under obligation to abide by the ruling of the 'Popular Committee of Three' which was deliberating the issue. The paper also prodded the parties to settle the issue between

themselves peacefully, lest ‘the police intervene and carry out the orders of the Land Authority’.⁹ This conciliatory message did not deter the Islamists, who pursued their attacks on the municipality for its ‘leaning on government documents, while the Muslims possess irrefutable Islamic documents attesting to the *Waqf* status of the land’.¹⁰ The Muslim media dealt vehemently with the Shihab-a-Din dispute almost on a daily basis in those stormy days, and naturally lent prominence and credibility to the Islamists’ claims. Some of them delved more deeply into history and history books and quoted various precedents and fatwas delivered by great Muslim Muftis in the surrounding Arab countries.¹¹ Some papers also reported that, ironically, Jeraysi and his supporters went to Arafat and the Palestinian Authority for help,¹² while Abu Nawwaf, the Head of the *Waqf* Board in Nazareth, and the main protagonist in the affair, expressed his wish to turn to Prime Minister Netanyahu for assistance.¹³ This was the first admission in public that the Islamists had been working on a deal with the incumbent Israeli government. Others implied that the Vatican and the French and Italian Consuls in Gaza were applying pressure on Arafat to convince the Islamists to desist from their plans to build the mosque in order to allow the millennium festivities to unfold in peace.¹⁴ No one at that point guessed, however, the *quid pro quo* that the Vatican had promised Arafat when the final status of Jerusalem came to the negotiation table with Israel.

The escalation of the Islamists’ broadsides was also expressed in terms of threats of violence if their demands were not met. Abu Nawwaf declared that he was warning the police and the municipality about bloodshed on the land of the Shihab-a-Din Tomb if force was used against the squatters; and, he added that: ‘The end will be bad and bitter if we do not get our rights.’¹⁵ Another source quoted him as saying that: ‘We are prepared to sacrifice hundreds of dead and wounded. If the police attacks us, they will not get away with it and will pay a heavy price.’¹⁶ This statement was seconded by Sheikh Fat’hi ‘Ali Nasser who declared that: ‘On this land no project will come to pass except our own, and we are prepared to die for it.’¹⁷ Abu Nawwaf also announced that now that the rights of the Muslims had been proved beyond doubt, the Muslims would begin to build the permanent mosque on the site within two weeks.¹⁸ The Islamists at that point also raised ‘compromise solutions’ which meant that the mosque would be built on the spot. Its architect, Ayman al-Tab’uni was quoted as saying that the planned mosque would resemble those of Andalusia, in that it would be erected on pillars, thus allowing the public plaza that the municipality had coveted. He said that the lower two stories of the planned structure would be conference halls and the mosque would be situated on the third floor, all topped with a magnificent glass dome. Three floors for parking would be provided under the building, and the whole project would sport a 100-m spiral-shaped minaret similar to the famous Samara minaret in Iraq.¹⁹ That meant that the Islamists were dreaming about a truly grandiose affair which would assuredly dwarf the Basilica and certainly provoke the Christians throughout the world. Maybe, for that very reason, Prince Hassan of Jordan who was apprised of the plan by a delegation of the Islamists, said that he could take no sides in the controversy.²⁰

The Mayor’s Counter-Attack

The Nazareth Democratic Front, the local guise taken by the communists led by Jeraysi, immediately grasped the danger and, in view of what was at stake, poised itself for a counter-

attack. Jeraysi understood that an attack on the Islamists could only backfire on his campaign, because of the mounting popularity of the Shihab-a-Din cause. At first, the embattled mayor countered the Islamists' plea to build the mosque by attempting to mobilize local Nazareth notables, other outside Muslim leaders, such as Ibrahim Nimr Hussein, the prestigious Mayor of Shefar'am and incumbent Chairman of the CHAC, and the two heads of the split Islamic Movement, Abdallah Nimr Darwish and Ra'id Salah. All of these, together with the heads of the Communist Party and the city councilors, were called upon to mediate and nip the brewing crisis in the bud.

The Christian counter-attack, spearheaded by Jeraysi, transcended the current crisis, looking to the local elections that were due in November 1998. At first, the serious accusations of the Islamic press had to be refuted. On 16 January 1998, in response to the Islamist accusations that he had joined in with the Israelis fighting his fellow Nazarenes, Jeraysi's Democratic Front published a manifesto heaping the blame for the crisis on the Israelis. For example, the General Security Services were condemned for 'pouring oil on the flames'.²¹ The Christians blasted the Islamists for maintaining long-standing contacts with the famous Greenberg, the Likkud's Adviser on Arab Affairs. They also revealed a 'plan' for the Christians and the Islamists to convene under the chairmanship of the Northern District Commissioner to find a solution to the crisis. Greenberg was credited with initiating the plan under the pretext that, unlike the 'popular Committee of Three' headed by Sheikh Natur, this new one would 'have teeth' and therefore would be able to take decisions and enforce them.²² But, in response to the accusation that he was encouraging the Islamists by visiting their illegal tent-mosque, Greenberg was quoted as claiming that it was the Islamists who had visited his home and asked for him to intervene. He also accused City Hall of having mishandled the affair from the beginning; so that it got out of hand. He was cited as supporting a change in the original plan for the city square in order to 'safeguard religious sentiments'.²³ But these statements were refuted by the Secretary of the Democratic Front in Nazareth, Misba' Zyad, who claimed Greenberg was 'a vote contractor for the Likkud in the Arab sector, which proved once again the declarations made previously by the Front regarding the collaboration between the General Security Services and the Islamists'.²⁴ Knesset Member 'Azmi Bishara, an outspoken Arab nationalist, also came to the help of the Christians by stating:

We are witnessing today a dangerous and questionable attempt to raise a new symbol in total disregard to historical facts. For, a place which had no particular historical significance was made a pivot for solidarity and the growth of a new collective [Islamic] identity that had never been known in Nazareth where relations of communal fraternity have always prevailed ... The Nazareth 2000 project wanted to simply underline the major touristic sites in the city, and it was not to blame if there were no Islamic sites at that place. A similar situation exists in Bethlehem, where the holy places all belong to the Christians despite the Muslim majority of the population ... This is as if voices were raised to build holy places for the Muslims in Nazareth [to rival the Christians].²⁵

Bracing for the Local Elections

Mayor Jeraysi now realized that any unofficial mediation of Arab notables in the affair would end in the Islamists' favor. Having effectively blocked the attempts at mediation by the Nazareth Court and the informal Arab-Muslim Committee of Inquiry – both of which seemed to be turning against him – he turned to his election campaign, hoping to capitalize on his incumbency and his

reputation as a skillful mayor, to defeat the challenge of the Islamists, without sounding in any way derogatory to them. To deflect from their emphasis on the Shihab-a-Din controversy, he would point out the outside 'common enemy' of the Nazarenes, in order to try to rally the entire city, as of old, around him and his Nazareth Front. In the preamble of the election campaign platform that his party published, emphasis was put on common experiences.

The Nazareth Democratic Front is a struggling organization, a road and a future, the Front for all Nazareth, that includes all its neighborhoods, communities and clans. We, as a people and as a national minority, have suffered and are continuing to suffer from land confiscation and siege around our cities and villages, from attempts to suffocate us economically, socially and otherwise, such as in the domain of budgets for development and in municipal services.²⁶

Only a mayor under siege, who knew how much promise the government-funded Nazareth 2000 project held for the development of the city, could have approved of such bitter propaganda. He feared the Islamists and would not attack Islam, so the easiest way was to rally the Nazarenes around the old nationalistic anti-Israeli slogans. At a time that he was lobbying government offices for funds and for help in the Shihab-a-Din dispute, he still found it politically expedient to bite the hand that was extending aid to him. He made his ill-feelings explicit:

We have grown used in this city to respect each other and to preserve our city and its unity and fraternity. Our enemy was, and still is, the oppressive government; those who are trying to absolve the government and transfer the enmity into our midst are perpetrating a very grave crime towards our people ... The address of the usurpers of our rights is well known; it is that which has in its possession the lands, the jobs, the budgets; and anyone who wishes to lend his shoulder to achieve our rights, ought to direct his accusations to the right address. We have always striven for unity in our struggle, in spite of the diversity of opinion.²⁷

Although the platform referred to the tourist development plans and to the year 2000, there was not a word about the Shihab-a-Din controversy, just a short notice about the plan to 'develop the City Square',²⁸ a euphemism for the brewing dispute. But, as the election campaign drew to its close in October 1998, the tone rose in intensity and rhetorical intransigence: the Islamists were attacking on all fronts, and the besieged mayor was desperately trying to hold on. In another election manifesto issued by the United Nazareth List (alias, the Islamist Union in Nazareth), entitled 'The Plots of Shahar and the Tricks of Jeraysi', Abu-Ahmed's supporters deplored the alleged plots concocted by the Northern District Commissioner, Yigal Shahar, in collaboration with the mayor in order to defeat the Islamists. They attacked Jeraysi for pretending in his propaganda that only half the population of Nazareth was Muslim and the rest Christian, while in fact the ratio was overwhelmingly in the Muslims' favor; and they ridiculed him for complaining that the city was neglected while it was his party which had ruled it for the past 20 years. They also invented a joint trip to the USA by Shahar and Jeraysi, which 'was financed by the public money of the Nazarenes', and pledged to put an end to corruption when they came to power. They particularly attacked the mayor for emphasizing the 'diverse Christian orders in their beautiful churches and monasteries', while forgetting that the city also sported many Muslim mosques and others sites; and they accused him of 'dwarfing the stature of the Muslims in Nazareth, in front of the entire world', an unforgivable sin for which the mayor was made accountable.

On 17 October 1998, the Islamic List held a large rally in the city to which it summoned all 'men and women, the old and the young', in preparation for 'the upcoming great victory' in the approaching elections. The speakers at the rally, who were to support Abu-Ahmed in the race for mayor, and the Islamic List (United Nazareth) for the city council, included two of the biggest names in the Islamist Movement and Arab politics: Sheikh Ibrahim Abdallah, the mayor of Kafr

Qassem – the center of the Islamic Movement in Israel at its inception, by reason of its most celebrated inhabitant, Sheikh Abdallah Nimr Darwish, the founder and spiritual leader of Islamists in Israel. The Mayor of Kafr Qassem, one of Sheikh Abdallah's most distinguished disciples, is nowadays the counterpart to the leader of the dissident group, Sheikh Ra'id Salah, the popular Mayor of Umm-al-Fahm, who was slated as the second keynote speaker in the rally. Others present were Knesset Member Talib al-Sani', Abu-Ahmed himself, and Ma'mun Hassan, one of Abu-Ahmed's prospective partners in the new Muslim-dominated city council after the elections. The remarkable feat of Abu-Ahmed was to bring together, on the same platform, the speakers of the two rival Islamist groups. This made Abu-Ahmed's predilections uncertain: for, while he had been officially affiliated with the more moderate group of Sheikh Abdallah, and held the title of Head of the Political Department in that organization, his activities on the *Waqf* Board and in the Nazareth election campaign exposed his less-than-moderate leanings toward the more activist style of Sheikh Ra'id. As expected, the speakers waved the Islamic banner high and urged the people of Nazareth to use their votes for the Islamists.

At the end of October 1998, just before election day, another set of accusations was launched at Jeraysi and his party, which brought the election campaign to a boiling point. Under headlines such as: 'They are shouting after the masks have been removed from their faces', and 'They have lost their nerve now we have discovered their treason', Mayor Jeraysi was personally humiliated and accused of attributing all sorts of illnesses and uncivilized behavior to the Muslims. The Islamists accused the Nazareth 2000 project, which was Jeraysi's pride and joy and the pivot of his electoral campaign, of being replete with scandals and possible danger to the city. The Islamists quoted the deputy mayor as saying that the project would not succeed, because the Likkud Government in Israel had cut the budgets that the previous Labor Government had allocated in the belief that they could make Nazareth replace Bethlehem, which had been ceded to the Palestinian Authority. They also condemned the city management for hiring a Jew, Han Oren, for the purpose of promoting the year 2000 as the birthday of a Messiah in whom he did not believe, etc.

The Local Elections and their Aftermath

As soon as the 10 November election results were published, the Islamists were extremely happy, even though only 135 votes separated them from their defeated rivals the Communists (15,666 versus 15,531), and even though they fell short of taking over the mayoralty (15,613 votes, or 47.59 percent for Abu-Ahmed versus 17,192, or 52.41 percent for Jeraysi). What the Islamists announced in their victory manifesto at the end of November did not augur well for the immediate future. They hailed the fact that the Muslims were recognized as the majority in the city council, and particularly savored the evidence that the Communists had been relegated to minority status for the first time in decades. The announcement also revealed that 'the leader, Salman Abu-Ahmed, had challenged the foreign Zionist-communist alliance and almost won the mayoralty'. This was clear evidence that the Islamists had believed all the time that the State of Israel had collaborated with the Christians to defeat them. This accusation, which the Zionist parties would try to disprove in the national elections of 1999, in the meantime damaged Mayor Jeraysi's reputation and forced him – against his convictions as evidenced in his electoral campaign – into the arms of the Israeli establishment. From that point on he had no choice but to

follow the path of confrontation with his Islamic opposition, knowing full well that this might be the end of his mayorship and political career altogether.

But the victory announcement of the Islamists – which predicted that the power of decision-making in City Hall would pass into their hands, by virtue of their majority and their capacity for taking over most of the city council committees which supervised the daily operation of the municipality – proved more difficult to implement than predicted. On 30 November 1998, the mayor sent a conciliatory circular letter to all elected members of the new city council, calling upon them to clear the air and begin joint work for the benefit of Nazareth. He proposed to the Islamists a process of negotiation to establish a coalition government,²⁹ and sent out invitations to the new council members for their first meeting.³⁰ Item three of the agenda was explosive, as it suggested the ‘approval of the mayor’s proposal to appoint a senior deputy mayor, who would serve as acting mayor in the latter’s absence, according to Article XIV of the Law on Municipalities’. Item four then proceeded to the election of regular deputy mayors, in accordance with Article XV of the Law on Municipalities. Apparently anticipating the trouble ahead, the city’s General Manager also invited to that opening session the Commissioner of the Northern District, Yigal Shahr, as well as the local Elections Commissioner and the Legal Adviser of the Municipality. Previous city council members as well as the media were also invited.³¹

It was not long before the storm erupted. The mayor suggested that either items three and four of the agenda be adjourned and relegated to the coalition negotiations between the two parties; or that they adopt immediately and unanimously his proposal for his senior deputy mayor, and also the Islamists’ proposal for two deputy mayors of their choice. The mayor emphasized that it was his prerogative to select a senior deputy whom he trusted and who would be able to replace him when called upon.³² He also stressed that, in accordance with the law, the city had to be managed by its elected mayor, and so it would be. He also warned that if the council used its majority to elect two deputy mayors without consensus, he would not delegate any authority to them, as Article XVII of the Law on Municipalities entitled him.³³ Jeraysi also suggested that a committee of six council members, three from each faction, should decide the constitution and composition of the council’s working committees, so that the work of the council could proceed, within the constraints of the law.³⁴

Abu-Ahmed, in response, made his agenda clear: the mosque should be built on the Shihab-a-Din site, as the natural outcome of public opinion as reflected in the election results. He vowed that this matter would be first and foremost on the city’s agenda, and tabled at the ‘next informal meeting of the city council’, a hint of an irregular meeting not convened by the mayor (who alone holds the constitutional right to call such meetings). He also took this opportunity to declare his loyalty to the Palestinian people and to pledge his support for the establishment of a Palestinian state with Jerusalem as its capital. On the questions in hand, he warned that he and his faction had come to the opening session of the council to elect the two deputy mayors, but also to object to the appointment of the senior deputy mayor. Thereupon, the mayor put to the vote the appointment of Dhahil Hamed as his senior deputy, a motion that was defeated as expected by a vote count of ten to nine. Therefore, the mayor announced that if other candidates were elected as deputy mayors in spite of his opposition, they would not enjoy any authority, and would receive no salary or benefits, as the legal situation required.³⁵

Unrelenting, Abu-Ahmed then tabled the names of his two candidates for deputy mayor (himself and Ahmed Zu’bi), claiming all the attending authority, position and benefits accruing to these posts. These two candidates were also to be authorized by the city council to execute all the business decided upon that the mayor would not be able to carry out himself; in other words

to stand in for the mayor if the present deadlock continued. Predictably, the mayor refused to table this resolution, arguing that it was illegal. A noisy and coarse exchange ensued, triggered by the impatient remarks of the mayor who felt he was being harassed by the opposition and was determined not to let them have their own way. In the chaos, the audience present also joined in, and the mayor threatened to close the session. He promised to clarify the legal issues with the Ministry of the Interior before the debate was resumed. After four hours of shouting, interpolations and serious arguments, the mayor closed the meeting without resolution or result.³⁶ A letter addressed to the mayor by Mr Singer, the Legal Adviser of the Ministry of the Interior, confirmed Jeraysi's stand that only he could delegate power to his deputies.³⁷ But, since he refused to do so because of his coalition partners' demands, the city council remained deadlocked. In February 1999, the Islamists on the city council petitioned the High Court of Justice to order the Mayor of Nazareth to show cause why their representatives on the city council were not appointed as senior deputy and deputy,³⁸ respectively, to the mayor. However, sensing that they had no case, they belatedly retracted their petition and had to pay the defendant's costs.

National Elections Loom on the Horizon

The impasse continued for months, making it impossible for the municipality to function. In April 1999, however, when the national elections in Israel loomed on the horizon, things began moving again. The mayor made a gesture towards his opponents by offering to appoint three equal deputy mayors, to whom he would delegate the powers of his choice.⁴⁰ That ploy would have enabled him to choose from among them one to his liking and delegate to him the powers of the senior deputy mayor, without making a statement to that effect. But it was to no avail. On 11 April, the Islamists devised a new trick to make the mayor give in to their wishes: through their Attorney, Zaki Kamal, they asked the mayor to convene an extraordinary session of the city council. This was, in effect, a repetition of a demand that the Islamists had lodged with the mayor in January which went unheeded. This time, however, in addition to their previous argument that the city council ought to be convened under the law at least once a month, they claimed that, according to the prevailing legal situation, the mayor must call for an extraordinary meeting of the council within seven days if he received a petition signed by one-third or more of the council members, or else the Minister of the Interior had to appoint someone else to call that meeting.

In April 1999, the 'Committee of Seven', which was appointed by the CHAC to address this issue, published an announcement that it said had been agreed upon by both the mayor and the *Waqf* Board. The announcement stated that the *Waqf* Board should continue its negotiations with Minister Katsav of the incumbent government. This meant, of course, that in view of the approaching elections, some deal had been worked out between the parties, and the *Waqf* Board was encouraged to pursue it. On the other hand, the committee said it had obtained the mayor's commitment not to interfere with any agreement that the *Waqf* Board might reach with the government. The committee also called upon the parties to refrain from any escalation of events by avoiding demonstrations and violence. The head of the Committee of Seven, Muhammed Zaydan, was asked to continue to follow the development of the negotiations between the government and the *Waqf* Board, with a view to building the mosque. In this way the CHAC

introduced itself as a party to the negotiation, so that what was happening in Nazareth was henceforth the business of all Arabs in Israel. And, what was more, the CHAC pronounced itself clearly in favor of erecting the controversial mosque, once the mayor had been neutralized under duress.⁴¹

But when on 18 April 1999, the Government published its decision to allow the construction of the mosque on a total area of 504 square meters, 'in order to relax the tensions' in Nazareth, it was clear to all that tension, if anything, could only escalate. For the Government did not order the removal of the tent. It only said it would 'act for the removal of the tent and of the people in it'. Nothing was done while the general elections loomed on the horizon; nothing was altered and everybody waited for the new government. One is struck, however, by the gradual yielding of the Government to the Islamists' demands: on 15 March 1999, Minister Katsav agreed to a mosque on an area of 400 square meters, while the Muslims demanded that the entire controversial area of over 2,000 square meters be shared between them and the plaza project.⁴² Then came the government's resolution to increase the mosque to 504 square meters, which the Islamists also rejected. Finally, they were given 750 square meters by the new government; which they would not have achieved if the legal course had been pursued to the end.

The upcoming elections, which were on everybody's mind and about which the Islamists were hopeful, were a nightmare for the mayor who saw the gradual whittling away at his project for the plaza every time a meeting took place between the *Waqf* people and government or party officials from the major Israeli contenders who rushed to Nazareth to fish in its troubled waters. Therefore, when he was given an ultimatum by the Minister of the Interior to settle the problems in his city and get City Hall functioning, lest the Minister be compelled to use his powers,⁴³ he panicked. Although the Minister expressly denied in his letter that the elections had anything to do with his threat, Jeraysi understood what it all meant: if the Minister used his authority and disbanded the city council, to call for new elections or to appoint a public commission to manage the city, that would be the end of Jeraysi's term as mayor, with little or no chance of ever being re-elected to that post again. Therefore, he tried to scuttle the Minister's announced plan of appointing the Commission of Inquiry discussed above, which could have recommended these exact options to the Minister.⁴⁴

The Islamists, who became more self-confident as the elections approached and as the political parties intensified their courting of them and their promises to them, also turned to the highest authorities to make as many gains as they could. In February 1999, a long list of Arab heads of local councils, Knesset members and other Arab notables, wrote to Prime Minister Netanyahu. They complained that the Land Authority and the police were preparing to act with force to remove the tent-mosque, when the whole affair was an internal one concerning the two major factions in the city council. They warned that such interference would be construed by Israeli Arabs as an attempt by the Likud Government to kindle the fire of animosity between the communities of Nazareth. They reminded the Government that the tent did not constitute any security or safety danger to Israel, and therefore any intervention by the Government could only backfire on it. 'Since we know,' the letter said, 'of your tolerance and openness towards religious Jews, we also expect you to show the same regard to religious Muslims, by directing government agencies to refrain from intervening in Nazareth. They said that after the Ministry of the Interior had withdrawn its mediation attempts between the two factions, they would voluntarily spend their time in pursuing similar reconciliatory steps.⁴⁵

Many people of good will were at work to bring about peace and reconciliation in Nazareth, some of them were naive and given to manipulation by the parties, others had an axe to grind in

the affair and wanted to accumulate personal credit for themselves. But, basically, the situation created by the 1997 invasion by the Islamists of the grounds of the public plaza and the inability of the local and national authorities to restore the *status quo*, only became more tangled. The local elections of 1998 did nothing to untangle the affair; nor did the national elections of 1999. Even the pragmatic solution provided by the Government in favor of the Islamists, and then the legal resolution delivered by the courts in favor of the Christians, took the dispute to new heights rather than putting an end to it.

Notes

- 1 For a discussion of this matter, see E. Rekhes, 'Arab Politics at the Crossroads', in Elie Rekhess and Tamar Yegnes (eds), *Arab Politics in Israel at the Crossroads* (Tel Aviv: Tel Aviv University, 1995), pp. 11-15.
- 2 The Islamic Party, headed by Abu-Ahmed, was the main group that would win four seats in the forthcoming local elections; followed by Independent Islamists (three); and the Arab Democratic Party, Women, and Shihab-a-Din (one seat each).
- 3 These events are covered in Ahmed, 'Memorandum', p. 2.
- 4 Formally, the Head of the National Religious Party, who was the Minister of Education, was also the Minister for Religious Affairs; but the Ministry was in fact headed by his Deputy, Yigal Bibi, who we have met in previous chapters.
- 5 Ahmed, 'Memorandum', pp. 2-3.
- 6 Letter from Qadi Natur to Attorney Fahum, dated 15 April 1998 [Arabic].
- 7 *Al-Ittihad*, 21 April (1998).
- 8 *Sawt al-Haqq wal-Huriyya*, 16 January 1998.
- 9 *Al-Sinara*, 6 February (1998).
- 10 See the Islamic weekly, *Al-'ahd wal-Mithaq* [*The Alliance and Covenant*], 12 January (1998), and the Islamist *Sawt al-Haqq wal-Huriyya*, 13 February (1998).
- 11 See, for example, *Sawt al-Haqq wal-Huriyya* and *Al-'ahd wal-Mithaq*, 16 January (1998).
- 12 *Kul-al'Arab*, 6 February (1998). See also, *Al-Sinara*, 9 January (1998) and *Sawt al-Haqq wal-Huriyya*, 13 February (1998).
- 13 *Al-Sinara*, 13 February (1998).
- 14 *Sawt al-Haqq*, 16 January (1998).
- 15 *Al-Sinara*, 16 January (1998).
- 16 *Fasl al-Maqal*, 15 January (1998).
- 17 *Sawt al-Haqq*, 6 January (1998).
- 18 *Al-Sinara*, 6 February (1998).
- 19 *Ibid.*, 23 January (1998).
- 20 *Ibid.*, 30 January (1998).
- 21 *Kul-al'Arab*, 16 January (1998).
- 22 *Ibid.*, 6 February (1998).
- 23 *Al-Sinara*, 16 January (1998).
- 24 *Ibid.*
- 25 *Fast-al-Maqal*, 22 January (1998).
- 26 The Nazareth Democratic Front's Platform, p. 3.
- 27 *Ibid.*, p. 5.
- 28 *Ibid.*, pp. 21-2.
- 29 Letter from Mayor Jeraysi to all members of the city council, 30 November 1998.
- 30 Letter from Abdallah Jubran, the City General Manager, to all members of the council, 12 December 1998.

31 Ibid.

32 Minutes of the first meeting of the city council, 15 December 1998, pp. 5-6.

33 Ibid.

34 Ibid., p. 11.

35 Ibid.

36 Ibid., pp. 14-22.

37 Letter from Shalom Singer, the Legal Adviser of the Ministry of the Interior, to Mayor Jeraysi, 17 December 1998.

38 See Supreme Court Document No. 8255/1999, dated 3 February 1999.

39 Supreme Court Document No. 8255/1999, dated 19 April 1999.

40 Letter from Mayor Jeraysi to Interior Minister Swissa, dated 1 April 1999.

41 See the text of the Announcement, signed by all the members of the Committee of Seven and released in Nazareth on 5 April 1999.

42 See Memorandum No. 99-01-3712, dated 8 April 1999, from Katsav's office.

43 See letter from Minister Swissa to Mayor Jeraysi, dated 25 March 1999.

44 Letter from Mayor Jeraysi to Minister Swissa, dated 23 March 1999.

45 Letter to Prime Minister Netanyahu, dated 18 February 1999, signed by nine Arab notables, including Members of the Knesset Walid Sadeq and Nawwaf Masalhah, the Mayors of Taibeh and Baqa, respectively, and one Qadi.

12.

Lessons and Conclusions

A number of questions were asked by the Commission of Inquiry, reflecting not only its own dilemmas but also the basic choices facing the Israeli Government and public with regard to the major issue of the relations between Jews and Arabs in Israel. The Arabs have become a large minority which no longer identifies itself as a religious, ethnic or linguistic group, but clearly as a national minority which requires national satisfaction. Against the background of mounting demands from the Arabs in Israel – which in fact delegitimize the Jewish state and demand that its Jewish traits be abolished to make way for symbols acceptable to them – resistance, indeed bitterness and disenchantment, have built up among the Jewish majority, which resents what it perceives as Arab machinations to destroy its national identity. If one adds to this, the Islamists, who are more vociferous and more daring in their demands, especially in the face of successive Israeli governments who care enough about their own re-election the next term to cater to the Arabs (and to the Ultra-Orthodox Jews for that matter) lest they lose those precious votes, one begins to comprehend the outline of the problem.

The outbreak of the Nazareth crisis and its convergence with the eve of the 1999 national elections, where all parties scrambled for Arab favor, showed that those who pledged most were not necessarily those who won the Arab vote. For all the effort and Government backing that Greenberg and Swissa were able to bring to the elections in courting the Arab sector, in the event the insignificant support they got (70 votes for the Likkud and 60 for Shas, respectively, out of 28,643 valid votes)¹ did not justify either the hopes or the resources placed in Nazareth, and certainly not the concessions made to the Islamists. These two parties' candidate for Prime Minister, incumbent Benjamin Netanyahu, did not fare much better. Out of 29,157 valid votes, only a laughable 322 were cast in his favor; while Barak, the Labor Party's candidate, received all the rest, though his party got only just under 1,000 votes in Nazareth.² The first sensible lesson one should learn, then, is that the Arabs in Israel in general, the Islamists in particular, will always elect either their own parties, as most of them have done in these elections, or vote for the Jewish leader who either promises them the most in terms of their interests, or seems to offer the least harm to the general Arab, Palestinian or Islamic interests.

Divisive Issues between Jews and Arabs

There are various issues which have far-reaching reverberations on the integration of the Arab minority into Israeli politics. For, even though the Arabs in Israel are not the only group in Israeli society which cares for its own sectorial interests (others, for example, are the Ultra-Orthodox

Jews and the new immigrants from Russia), none of the latter utterly and publicly sheds its responsibility over the welfare of Israeli society in general. All of them express their views, admittedly from their particularistic, biased, ideological or practical angle, but for the general public benefit nonetheless. One can hardly find an Arab, of any political tendency, least of all the Islamists, who is concerned about the major issues of existence and direction which are at the root of national consensus in the country. For example, national security, the buzz-word for anything of importance relating to the defense of the state, is totally ignored or even resisted, resented and attacked by the Arabs; as are the questions of settlement and development of arid areas, reforestation, immigration of Jews (the very rationale for the establishment of the Jewish state), etc. They totally reject the concept of the Jewish state, and they are interested in it only to the extent that it serves their purposes, fulfills their needs, or yields to other Arabs. For example, in any peace negotiation between Israel and other Arabs, the Arabs of Israel would align themselves automatically with Arab demands, and would never consider the possibility that their own country might be right in the debate.

In questions of national security or development, the Arabs would not lift a finger: they could not care less if their country were defeated at war; they would not approve any military expenditure; would not yield anything for the country's general welfare; would not rejoice in its successes; nor expend any effort to spare its image or defend it from its attackers. Young Arabs who volunteer for the military service come under unbearable pressure to desist as if they were fighting for their enemies, and any national imperative is vigorously and unrelentingly combatted. For example, in order for the military to train, they need firing ranges and fields for maneuver, which occasionally necessitates confiscation of lands for public benefit. The Jews accept that situation, though reluctantly, but no one denies the need for an army to train. The Arabs raise all the reasons in the world to attack the military as 'oppressive', and will not advance one alternative course of action to have the army, which also defends them, adequately trained. So it goes for land confiscation for the purpose of building roads and airports, which when touching upon areas populated by Arabs – though not necessarily owned by Arabs – is always sure to create havoc as if a foreign power had invaded the land in question.

All this means that the Arabs in Israel, even those in public office, politicians in the Knesset or in government, will usually adopt sectorial measures concerning the Arab population: if they want budgets, roads, school, health, it is only for the Arabs in Israel, one can rarely hear them raise an outcry about the dearth of those same services in Israel in general. All these items come under the heading of 'equality', which is a term used by a social stratum that wants everything like all the rest of the population, but wants nothing to do with the duties that one has towards one's country. These concerns, of which the Nazareth issue was only one example, were expressed in the 'letters of understanding' that the various Arab parties reached with the Labor Party prior to the 1999 elections. One of these was an informal pledge given to the Islamists that their demands would receive a favorable hearing. Once upon a time, the Christians' grievances were also heard, but since their numbers began to dwindle and their leadership over Arab parties passed to Muslims, their voice was silenced.

It is interesting to contrast the above with the aggressive demands submitted by the Arab-Muslim Lists on the eve of these elections, which resonated among the Arab electorate. For example, the United Arab List, in which the moderate Islamists were major partners, wrote a letter to Ehud Barak on 12 April 1999,³ suggesting that Israel was the state of the Jews and the Arabs equally, and listing a long series of measures to be taken to ensure equality for all the citizens of Israel:

- A new state constitution that would recognize the Arabs in Israel as a national minority. This demand, of course, meant that the Arabs wished to turn Israel into a bi-national state, with all the disruptive potential of Bosnia at worse (due to the state of violence in both cases), Canada or Belgium at best (if the Middle East should become as peaceful and prosperous in the long run).
- Regarding education, the document requires that Arabs should be educated according to their values to be loyal to their people and that they should have their separate educational administration, just like the ultra-religious Jews. This item not only shows the similarity in demands which make collusion possible between the Islamists and the ultra-religious Jews in Israel, but goes one dangerous step forward: for even if the Ultra-Orthodox Jews find no affinity with Jewish secular education, they still consider themselves as part of the same people and claim no loyalty to anyone else; the Arabs, however, by claiming recognition of their loyalty to their people, whose hostile attitudes toward Israel need not be proved, they demand state financing for their own embracing of the same hostile attitudes as of right.
- A demand that the Arabs be represented proportionately in the Urban Planning Commissions throughout the country. That is, a regime of quotas which does not take into account state needs, personal skills etc., but Arab national aspirations which, needless to say, are inimical to any development in Israel. This would mean a systematic blocking of all national projects for road development, the absorption of new immigration, and the allocation of lands for security needs (ranges, maneuvers, barracks, intelligence and other installations), which are automatically opposed by the Arabs. One has to add that in any case, all Arab mayors and heads of local councils, like their Jewish compatriots, act *ex officio* also as heads of their local Urban Planning Commissions. The intriguing aspect of this demand is that the Arabs totally reject the Jewish-Zionist contours of the Israeli structure, but they think they can be given a say in its architectural design in order to undo it.
- A demand that the Arabs should be given full representation in national television, radio and the telephone system, and in state-owned corporations, again 'proportionately to their numbers' in the population. This could be taken, of course, as a desire to take full part in state matters, but their insistence on quotas, which if heeded would lead to other claims by other interested parties, suggests that all they wish is to take care of their sector of the population, not to oversee the entire interest of the state and society in Israel. Interestingly enough, though, this list does not include anything having to do with the military, because there the demand for equality ends.
- Here is something from the Islamists: a demand that Muslims be recognized as an official community, and that its religious judges (the Qadis) should function and be funded like the Chief Rabbinate, and would function according to the Muslim world-view. This means that in the Nazareth dispute, for example, if the Qadis declared that the land in question was *Waqf*, no one could challenge its verdict. Another Islamist item on the list, was the demand that the management of all mosques, cemeteries and *Waqf* lands should be in the hands of Islamic institutions.
- The Arabs demanded that their 18-21-year-olds be entitled to unemployment benefits. The significance of this is that while Jewish youth of that age spend these years in military service, and do not get any benefits, Arabs would both be exempted from military service and rewarded for reneging on their national duty
- In the face of the existing laws requiring the demolition of houses built without permission

from the Urban Planning Authorities, the Arabs required that they be exempted from that law, and that their illegally built structures should be recognized and approved after the fact. This would have given the illegal structure built by the Islamists in Nazareth, and any other structure they might build in the future, an automatic stamp of approval. One can only imagine what urban planning chaos this would cause.

- The State of Israel would be required to refurbish all Christian and Muslim religious sites in the country, especially in Jewish settlements and in destroyed villages, something that would give the overseers of *Waqf* the right to intervene all over the country, even outside Arab villages.
- The Arabs demanded that a special department for strategic planning for Arab towns and villages be founded and funded by the state; but it would be under the supervision of the Follow-up Commission of CHAC; this would give a tool of separate government to CHAC, which is not officially recognized by the State of Israel.
- Nazareth must be recognized as an Arab county and as a metropolitan Arab center for all matters relating to employment, institutions and culture. Among other things, an Arab university should be established in the city; two secondary Arab metropolitan centers should be established in the Triangle (the eastern part of the coastal plain; the demand remained vague on the issue of whether this metropolitan area should be focussed on Ummal-Fahm, the hub of the fundamentalist Islamists, or in Kafr Qassem, the center of its more moderate competitors), and Rahat in the Negev for the Bedouins. The Arabs also demanded that the principle of a 'bi-national metropolitan area' be adopted for the Beersheba region, to give an equal national voice to the Arabs in the development of the capital of the Negev.

This amazing array of demands, which if granted would usher in the bi-national status of Israel, was not part of an agreement between the Arabs and the Labor Party prior to the elections. But, in view of the intensive negotiations between the parties, and particularly due to the consent of the Labor candidates to negotiate this memorandum as a base for future contacts after the new government was established, it was reasonable to assume that many of the Arab negotiators, especially the Islamists among them, may have been led to believe that some of their aspirations would be fulfilled. Only in this light can one understand the far-reaching concessions made to the Islamists in the Nazareth dispute immediately after the elections. Towards the end of April, merely two weeks prior to these elections, a similar memorandum was sent to Barak by the Secretary General of the Hadash Communists.⁴ This list of demands, which also reflected the Mayor of Nazareth's views, differs in some details from its predecessor, which reflected more the views of the Islamists and their allies. Besides the general statement for equality, there is a more strident and more pressing emphasis on recognizing the Arabs as a national minority. The state was also urged to develop tourism in places such as Nazareth and Kafr Kanna, to stress Arab identity in educational programs, and to abrogate the compulsory military service of the Druze youth. In all other regards, the demands of the two Arab lists are almost identical and indicative of the separate development they envisaged for their constituency, while at the same time they continued to stress their equality within the same state.

Lessons Learned

The bottom line of all this is that the Arabs of Israel in general, and the Islamists in particular, have learned from the Nazareth experience that if they are persistent enough and aggressive enough, they are bound to win their case, since they basically can rally their Muslim majority behind them for any showdown with the government, and certainly with the Israeli Christians. They have also learned that they hold the keys to any future election of a Labor candidate for the role of Prime Minister, and of any government led by the Labor Party. They have also internalized the methods used by the Ultra-Orthodox religious parties who would support whoever satisfies their sectorial needs. The only problem is that they would have had a much more spectacular leverage if they represented, like the Shas Party, one unified block. Being themselves bitterly split between Islamists and communists, Muslims and Christians, modern secularists and newage traditionalists, Arab nationalists (who vote only for Arab parties) and malleable Israelis (who still, or once again, vote for general Israeli parties), and sworn individualist careerists versus any groupings which might dwarf their persona or ego, their impact is diluted.

From the Islamists' viewpoint, their list of achievements is remarkable:

- They have succeeded in announcing to the world that Nazareth has become a Muslim city, with a Muslim majority, and that they intend to translate that change into a managerial and daily reality. Already, they have won over the city council, and it is only a matter of time before they also take over the mayoralty.
- From a city renowned for its Christian historical and holy sites, they have made Nazareth a city replete with Muslim sites, the latest of which is the disputed land near the Basilica of the Annunciation. History, memory and archaeology notwithstanding, the Muslim claims over the disputed land were vindicated.
- The long tradition of safeguarding the *status quo*, which had been established by the Ottomans and preserved by the British and the Israelis, was distorted by the Islamists who have now expanded the restricted list of seven holy places with an additional two in Jerusalem and Bethlehem.⁵ Now, at any time, anywhere, they could lay claim to more 'holy sites', either by virtue of their being *Waqf* properties or simply because they were taken over by force and redesignated as such.
- For the Islamists, the victory in Nazareth was seen as the first step in thwarting the attack by the 'New Crusaders' (Christians and Jews) against the *Dar-al-Islam (Pax Islamica)* in what was, and will revert to be once again, the holy land of Palestine. After they laid the cornerstone for their new mosque in December 1999 just in time to disrupt the millennium festivities, they waved their fists in the air with cries of 'next will come Jerusalem'.

From the Christian perspective things look much gloomier:

- In spite of the considerable support they got from the Vatican and other Christian bodies worldwide, the Christians in Israel are in a state of fear and disappointment, and sense the end of an era. Paradoxically for them, precisely at a time when they were expected to become the focus of attention of the Christian world during the millennium, they suffered the most devastating blow to their prestige and standing, delivered by their historical rivals, the Muslims.
- The Vatican, and other Christian organizations, have usually elected to side with the Arabs,

in their desperate attempts to preserve what is left of Christianity in Islamic lands. In the past few years, realizing that Israel was perhaps a better safeguard for Christian holy places, the Vatican has improved its relations with the Jewish state. Therefore, the Israeli Government's unexpected concession to the Islamists in Nazareth came as a shock to both the Vatican and to Christians in general.

- Nazareth had been the political bastion of the Christians in Israel as it was the thriving center of all Arab nationalist parties, of which the Christians were often the founding leaders. It was, and still is, the hub of the Communist Party in Israel. But things have changed: the Christians have been sidelined by a new Muslim leadership, and the decline of the Communist Party in general has seen the Islamists filling the political vacuum.
- Demography has been the most cruel and inexorable agent in the shrinking stature of the Christians in Israel, compared with the thriving position of the Muslims. Their decline is not only marked by their smaller birth rates (due to their more modern way of life), but also due to their abandoning villages and towns where their minority status has become untenable in an Islamist environment. Like their coreligionists in Bethlehem and East Jerusalem, they are either moving to larger mixed cities where they can merge unnoticeably, or are emigrating abroad.
- It is sad for the Christians in Nazareth to realize that Jeraysi will probably go down in history as the last Christian mayor. Even though in his present capacity he was not elected as a Christian but as a communist, the fact that the communists in Nazareth are declining and the Muslims already by far outnumber the Christians, the current clash in Nazareth has highlighted his Christian identity in contrast to his Islamist rivals.
- The Christians have usually steered their course in Israel along two alternative routes: either adopting a quietist profile and mixing into Israeli society and adopting its ways; or being more 'pious than the Pope' in heading, founding and funding Arab nationalist groups in order to show to their Muslim compatriots that they are no less patriotic than them. It is this latter course, which was customarily pursued by the Christian leadership, which is likely to be put aside. The time for retribution for past follies has dawned.
- The Vatican, in its desperate attempt to salvage the millennium celebrations, was ready to make concessions to the Muslims on other fronts, provided the Islamists could be made to yield in Nazareth. Hence, the Vatican's accusation that Israel had 'fomented inter-community tensions in Nazareth', and its apparent pledges to Arafat to side with him on the issue of the permanent settlement in Jerusalem, if he could prevent the building of the mosque near the Nazareth Basilica.
- The Christians in Israel have evinced once again, like many of their contemporaneous brethren throughout the Islamic world, that dhimmitude is not only a legal and social status, but also a state of mind that is hard to eradicate. Instead of rising and shrugging off the yoke of domination of their Muslim compatriots, their leaders did everything they could to appease the Islamists and to prove their loyalty to the Arab cause even as they were being abused.

From the Israeli point of view, the many questions posed by the Commission of Inquiry remained unanswered:

- Once again the state institutions failed to address themselves to the long-term issue of the relations between Israel and its Arab citizens, and elected to produce short-term and

insufficient answers to the burning problem at hand. The result is that the same problem is bound to recur, again and again, and every government will leave the never-resolved root problem to its successor.

- The state institutions, due to their predilection for seeking easy and transitory, rather than (not necessarily) the more painful but permanent solutions, have once again put the immediate needs raised by electoral considerations over the long-term state interests. Therefore, the Christian minority was abandoned in favor of the Islamic majority.
- Violent and law-breaking citizens, under false pretensions which were ultimately refuted by the courts of law, received what they had pressed for, and made the politicians yield to their demands; the rules of common sense and of law notwithstanding.
- The state institutions proved helpless in insuring the functioning of a city of 60,000 for more than a year after the elections. Not that the law is reticent on these matters, it speaks very explicitly about the authority and the duty of the Minister of the Interior to take the necessary measures to this end. None were taken, again for political reasons which do not justify this disregard for the law.
- In their attempt to mediate, cajole, gain time, and gain credit, the authorities ended up with being accused by all parties of kindling the disagreement between the parties in Nazareth and for dismally falling short of fulfilling their duty under law.
- The authorities of Israel, in their attempt to be humane, understanding and avoiding confrontation and violence, ended up prolonging the conflict unnecessarily, by failing to restore the *status quo* immediately after it was violated. They then allowed the courts of law to pass judgment after they themselves were incapable of enforcing the law; and then acted contrary to the court judgment and in disregard of equality before the law. In retrospect, one can confirm the old adage that the first confrontation is also the easiest; if the wound is kept open and festering, the next confrontation will be the worst. In the meantime, irreversible damage was caused to the law enforcement authorities: first, by not pushing the police to act, and then by overriding the decisions of the courts.
- The state looked on helplessly and pitifully as its national decision-making process, under successive governments, was torn to pieces by a violent minority who swore to undo the Government's decisions to celebrate the millennium in Nazareth. In the process, considerable damage was done to the state apparatus, to its security and law enforcement agencies, to its plans for tourism and the economy; as well as its relations with the Christian world.

Conclusions

There is no doubt that the Nazareth crisis, which is far from over, will nevertheless shape developments in Israel in the future. First and foremost, the standing, the self-confidence, the visibility and the acuity of the Arab minority issue will gain momentum in the coming years. More pressing demands will be heard from the Arabs, for example, to play a full part in decision-making and in deciding the destiny of the country. Unless, of course, decisions are taken in the immediate future by the Israeli Government to neutralize these demands by positing a state-sponsored blueprint for the equalization of rights and duties of all citizens in the country. While many Arab citizens, especially Christians and moderate Arabs, are likely to submit to such an

agreed scheme that would end their abnormal situation in a Jewish-Zionist state, the most vociferous nationalists and Islamists among them, will continue to press for equality with rights only, and no duties. An Arab response of this sort would remain unacceptable for the Jewish majority, and this would exacerbate the tensions. The Jewish establishment would be able to make more half-way concessions and *ad-hoc* accommodations to gain time and quiet for a while; but the day will come when the reality of more demands on the one hand, and a staunch refusal to accept them on the other, will turn into a full-fledged confrontation between Jews and Arabs in Israel.

The Islamists have emerged from the Nazareth dispute as the most insistent and the most persistent advocates of their rights. True, the communists too have advanced their lists of demands to the Labor Party prior to the elections, but in view of their dwindling weight and the correspondingly growing role of the Islamists, they are more likely to seek pragmatic accommodations with the Government. However, the Islamists, especially those of the Sheikh Ra'id complexion, do not hide their basic disagreement with the Jewish state, and will seek to emerge from each dispute strengthened, more secessionist and more high-profile and demanding. One major victim of this process will be the Christians, who will have to bow their heads beneath the Islamists or seek refuge under Jewish wings or abroad. They are already looking with horror at their cities being Islamized, their holy shrines diminished or challenged, and their traditional protectors in the West and the Vatican standing by while their millennial culture is being decimated, or at least nibbled at with impunity, and their history rewritten.

Muslim demography did not only overwhelm the Christians and marginalize them, but it has also had its impact on the Jewish majority. For, in spite of the large number of Jewish immigrants from all over the world over the years, the proportion of the Muslim community in Israel has increased from 15 to nearly 20 percent. With the potential pools of Jewish immigration to Israel now nearly exhausted, the proportion of Muslims will increase ever further in the future, and their demands for parity in the cultural and ethnic make-up of the Jewish state will commensurately increase. This means, that as the proportion of Muslims grows, not only will the Christians be pushed to the sidelines, but the hegemony of the Jews will also be jeopardized. This may further alter the inter-communal relationships in Israel in unpredictable ways. For example, since many of the new immigrants from Russia are Christian, and they have been absorbed in Israel by virtue of their marriage with a Jewish partner, they may in time reinforce the dwindling Christian community in some interesting ways.

Nazareth is still considered a Christian holy place, principally by reason of its Basilica which is cared for by the extant Christian population. Pilgrims come and go, and millennium celebrations will not recur before another thousand years are up. What will happen in between? When the new mosque is built on the site, and after the city government passes into Islamic hands, what would prevent the new rulers from erecting additions to the mosque that would finally obscure the Basilica. What would prevent the total Islamization of the city and the crushing of the remnants of the Christians there? In such an atmosphere, what Christians from either within or without Israel would dare to visit an increasingly hostile place? Ultimately, who is to prevent the Muslims, in a gesture of final victory, from turning the Basilica into a mosque to celebrate their triumph (as of old)? Several steps have already been taken in that direction. At first, for a millennium, no one challenged the Christian hold on that place; then came the Islamists who advanced a counter-claim. They turned the grounds into disputed land in which they achieved parity with the Christians; then they turned that place into a Muslim holy site; then they made clear that they wished their mosque to be taller and more impressive than the Basilica,

precisely on that same spot where their glories could be compared in close proximity. What remains is the obliteration of any Christian vestige in newly Islamized Nazareth.

In the twelfth century, when Muslim Sicily was overrun by the Normans, a Mufti called al-Mazari issued a fatwa, in which he condoned the choice of Muslims to remain there under non-Islamic rule, because then they would be able to act for the return of the island to Islamic rule, and in the meantime 'guide the Christians in the right path'.⁵ Another Muslim jurist, Ibn Hazm of Andalusia who straddled two millennia (994-1064), was in favor of appealing to Islamic powers to launch a Jihad in order to rescue Islamic cities from falling to non-Islamic rule.⁶ In their dealings with the Israeli authorities, the pragmatic Islamists follow al-Mazari's path with remarkable success, while the more militant among them continue to dream about Ibn Hazm's course of action. As long as the Israeli authorities collaborate with them, they have no reason to reverse course. But when in the future they sense that the day of Jihad has come, they will not hesitate to do violently to the Jews what they are now doing to the Christians.

Notes

1 Ghanem and Ozacky-Lazar, *Survey of Arab Affairs*, p. 40.

2 Ibid., pp. 40 and 48.

3 Ibid., pp. 30^: letter by member of the Knesset, Talib a-Sani', and Islamist candidate, Tufiq al-Khatib, to candidate for Prime Minister Ehud Barak, dated 12 April 1999.

4 Ibid., pp. 34-5: letter from Muhammed Barakeh, the Secretary General of Hadash, to Barak, dated 27 April 1999.

5 David Wasserstein, 'Muslims under Non-Islamic Rule: Matters of Principle and Comparison', in Rekhes and Yegnes, *Arab Politics in Israel*, p. 78.

6 Ibid., p. 77.

Postscript

One year after the settlement provided by the Israeli Government and accepted by the Muslims of Nazareth, the municipality found a way to limp along by forming a coalition which was headed by Christian Mayor Jeraysi, but in fact dominated by the Islamic Movement and its allies on the city council. An Israeli journalist, Sharon Gal, who visited the Shihab-a-Din site in September 2000, reported in *Ha'aretz* (3 September) on the developments he witnessed.

He visited the site on a weekday at night, which is different from visiting during Friday prayer when thousands of worshippers flock to manifest their presence. Another, smaller, mosque-tent was erected by the Islamists on half the space of the site allocated to them for the building of the permanent mosque, and its Imam walks in and out at all times, and is approached by his flock of Believers. Young children are schooled in religious studies in the tent. Also, outside the tent, where the symbolic cornerstone was laid six months previously, adults cluster around to signify their determination to pursue the building of the permanent structure that the government had promised them.

Outside the mosque, and opposite what used to be known as the Plaza of the Basilica, people congregate to discuss local politics, in what has become the 'Muslim Parliament' of the city. This is, in fact, a continuation of the activities which had been initiated by the Islamic Movement three years earlier when the Plaza was invaded. However, the Islamists of the United Nazareth faction still insist that the Shihab-a-Din Affair has done them only good, since the place has become a vibrant center of activity, youth are coming to study religion, and the successive victories they achieved only strengthened them; none of which existed in Nazareth prior to the eruption of the crisis. A feeling of reaching a turning point in the city's history dominates the Muslim population, which speaks of nothing less than a revolution-in-making in the largest Arab city in Israel.

Local opinion makers, including the local Christian journalists, take it for granted that city politics will be revolutionized as well when the mayoralty is turned over to the Muslims in the next elections, scheduled for 2003. Some of them are even afraid that alcohol might be prohibited in town as a result, as in other Muslim towns where Islamist mayors have taken over since 1988 and instituted Muslim laws by virtue of their authority to legislate municipal by-laws in their localities. These fears predominate even though Suleiman Abu-Ahmed, the prospective Muslim mayor, and the present Head of the Islamic List, does not look like the other Muslim mayors who grow beards and dress in traditional Muslim garb. Abu-Ahmed is indeed a traditionalist, although not a fervent and zealous observant like Sheikh Salah, his counterpart in Umm al-Fahm.

Abu-Ahmed himself is from a family of modest background which immigrated to Palestine from Transjordan some three centuries ago. While another branch of the family settled in southern Palestine, not far from Gaza, his branch had elected to settle down in Nazareth, where some family members had become civil servants. The whole clan of 500 which now populates Nazareth, had changed its name from Mohanna to Abu-Ahmed, and Suleiman and his brother,

Attorney Tawfiq Abu-Ahmed, are considered worthy leaders of the clan. When the Islamic Movement in Israel split, Abu-Ahmed stuck with its founder and leader, Sheikh Nimr Darwish, and was rewarded by this appointment to head the Political Department of the Southern Wing of the movement; this is considered more pragmatic and moderate than the 'rebellious' Northern Wing, led by Sheikh Ra'id Salah. In his capacity as the 'Foreign Minister' of the Southern Wing, Abu-Ahmed is welcomed by his fellow Islamists in Arab countries that he visits regularly.

When interviewed by the author of this report, he insisted that there was 'nothing wrong' with Umm al-Fahm or its leader, as there was nothing wrong with returning to religion or with 'being right'. He explained that although the residents of Umm al-Fahm are dubbed 'extremists' by some, their movement has increased their self-confidence. He had begun his political career under the leadership of the legendary Tawfiq Zyad, in an early version of the Communist Party, but since the 1989 elections, when the local Islamist Party headed by 'Umar Shararah won six seats on the city council – which Zyad feared was under the influence of Iran – Salman Abu-Ahmed and his brother found their way into the opposition. In the 1993 elections, he headed the Islamic List called al-Risalah (the Mission), but since the Islamists were split into three parties, their combined effort generated only four seats, which was a net loss of one-third of their previously held six seats.

The death of Zyad and the election of Jeraysi to replace him renewed the determination of the local Islamists to remove Jeraysi so that the Muslim city of Nazareth be represented, led and managed by Muslims. The Abu-Ahmed brothers, confident that the Islamists constituted a much larger pool of voters than the communists, built the United List of all Islamist factions, and in the elections of 1998 won a plurality of the seats on the city council. Both insist that the Muslim religion is not their exclusive concern, but the social needs of the city. However, in the direct vote for mayor, Jeraysi still won 52 percent of the vote compared to Suleiman Abu-Ahmed's 48 percent. The majority was achieved, nonetheless, on the city council due to the aggressive electoral campaigning by the Muslim factions which centered on the Shihad-a-Din issue. This made them realize that religion, as a symbol and as a means of identity – though not necessarily as a pious way of life – had become the most powerful mobilizing factor in Nazareth's politics.

The city council was paralyzed after the elections, due to the inability of the elected mayor to get down to business without first settling the Shihad-a-Din issue to the Islamists' satisfaction. The coalition pact was not signed until January 2000 when Jeraysi and Abu-Ahmed agreed that all decisions be taken unanimously, thus vindicating the Islamists' vow that no 'stone could be moved without their approval'. Even though the city council does not function smoothly due to the deadlock between the Islamic majority and the Christian mayor, Abu-Ahmed is conscious of the tremendous support he gets from the Muslims on the street, and confident that his day will come soon in the next elections. On his agenda are eight more mosques he wants to construct in this erstwhile Christian city, and spiritual centers for the Muslims to match the 'Fountain Square' that Jeraysi had built on the Christian site of the Annunciation.

Once he is elected as mayor of Nazareth, Abu-Ahmed will not rest on his laurels. He feels bitter against the Jewish state which has reduced him to being part of a minority in what he regards as his country, where he ought to be the landlord. He rebels against the very concept of the Right of Return of the Jews and insists on Palestinian rights to return to the Galilee, Jaffa, Ramleh, Safed and Tiberias, and the rest of Israel. Thus, for him even the establishment of a Palestinian state on the West Bank and in Gaza will not resolve the issue. Asked whether he was not worried that many acts of sabotage against Israel were committed by members of the Islamist Movement – his movement – in Israel (as posited in the Introduction to this book), he claimed

that this was libel, and that when Muslims killed Jews it was a regular criminal act which had nothing to do with religion. Moreover, he showed sympathy for the murderers due to the 'pressure they are subjected to by the State of Israel'.

However, when he was asked about his role models, he mentioned the Prophet Muhammad, the Second Caliph Umar Ibn al-Khattab, Saladin and Hassan al Banna, all Muslim heroes, the first three connected with the redemption of Palestine (the Prophet spiritually, Umar and Saladin militarily and politically), and the latter the founder of the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt, of which the Muslim Movement of Abu-Ahmed claims to be part. In light (or obscurity) of his vision of an Arab Palestine, to the exclusion of the Jewish state, it is rather ominous that Abu-Ahmed should regard himself as the heir of those who had delivered Jerusalem from the hands of the Unbelievers: Umar from the Byzantine Orthodox Church, Saladin from the Christian Crusader, and now from the Jews and Christians who are considered in Muslim fundamentalist circles as the 'New Crusaders'.

In August 2000, before permits for the construction of the Shihab a-Din mosque were an issue and the plans for the construction finalized and approved by the various Urban Planning Committees, the Islamists began hauling building materials to the plaza and threatening to begin the construction work even without permits. The Israeli Ministry of the Interior kept placating the Islamists and promising them that the construction would proceed on schedule, though the Islamists accused the Israeli authorities of dragging their feet and scuttling the Israeli Government's Ministerial Committee's decision to allow the mosque to be erected. In the meantime, three architects from Jordan have announced that they would be happy to design the mosque, and similar offers from Egyptian architects are awaited. A spokesman for the Islamists claims that the longer they wait for the plans to be implemented the more they stand to gain politically, because the Muslims of the city have united behind that symbol of the end of communist rule and the beginning of the Muslim rule in Nazareth.

While this book is going to press, a flurry of diplomatic activity has been going on. Prime Minister Sharon, who visited President Bush in Washington in April 2001, was questioned on the matter and asked to review Israel's stand on the issue, following representations by the Vatican to the White House. Other diplomats from the Vatican have intervened on various political levels in many European capitals in an attempt to reverse the Israeli Government's decision to permit the new mosque to dwarf the Basilica of the Annunciation, which would signify the final slip of Nazareth into Muslim hands. After the recent loss of Bethlehem to Palestinian Islamists, the Christian world is not about to swallow complacently the fall of another Christian city to Islam.

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Index

Abbasids, [5](#), [17](#)
Abraham, Judge, [139](#), [142](#)
Abramovic, Judge, [141](#), [142](#)
Abu Ahmed, Salman, [63](#), [69](#), [82](#), [88](#), [91](#), [94–5](#), [100](#), [102](#), [104ff.](#), [114](#), [121ff.](#), [150–3](#), [156ff.](#), [177](#), [179](#)
Abu Ahmed, Tawfiq, [177](#)
Abu-al-Asal, Archbishop Ryah, [43](#)
Abu Nawwaf, [83–4](#), [104](#), [120](#), [124ff.](#), [138ff.](#), [152–3](#)
Abu ‘Ubayda, [57](#)
Acre, [5](#), [7](#), [10](#), [22](#), [23](#), [63](#); Archbishop of, [21](#)
Acts (Bible), [2–3](#)
Afghanistan, [52](#)
‘Aflaq, Michel, [39](#)
Agranat, Justice S., [32](#)
Al-Ahali, [93](#)
Al-Ard, [42](#)
Al-Kamil, Sultan, [7](#)
Al-Mazari, [175](#)
Al-Ahd wal-Mithaq, [162](#)
Al, Aqsa, [65](#)
Al-Mirsad, [40](#)
Al-Mithaq, [63](#)
Al-Qassam, Izz a-Din, [64](#)
Al-Risalah, [177](#)
Al-Sawt, [43](#)
Al-Sinara, [60](#), [93](#), [152](#)
Al-Rabitah, [47](#)
Al-Zahar, Dr, [66](#)
Al-Sirat, [57–8](#)
Al-Zahir, Kamil, [44](#), [47](#)
Algeria, [52](#)
Allenby, General, [12](#)
Aman, [7](#)
America/USA, [49](#), [57–8](#), [125](#), [156](#); South, [46](#); Council of Bishops, [95](#)
Amman, [125](#); Mufti of, [126](#)
Ammor, Minister Shaul, [93](#)
Amos (Bible), [2](#)
Andalusia, [20](#), [153](#), [175](#)
Anglican, [23](#), [34](#), [46](#); Church, [30](#)
Anglo-American Commission, [22](#)
Ankara (*see also* Turkey), [66](#)
Annunciation, [3–4](#), [29](#), [178](#); Basilica of the, [xi](#), [1](#), [3–6](#), [10](#), [26](#), [28–9](#), [33](#), [73](#), [80](#), [82](#), [84](#), [87ff.](#), [98](#), [103](#), [113](#), [121ff.](#), [136ff.](#), [145](#), [153](#), [170–1](#), [174–5](#), [179](#); Plaza of the, [176](#)
Antioch, [8](#)
Anti-Semitism, [53](#), [57–8](#), [67](#)
Apocalypse (*see also* Meggido), [78–9](#)
Arab, [21–2](#), [34](#); cause, [38–9](#), [53](#), [57](#); councils (*see also* CHAC), [43](#); countries, [19](#), [54](#), [62](#), [152](#), [177](#); Democratic Party, [77](#); Front, [42](#); heads of states, [19](#); Israelization of, [67](#); language, [41–2](#), [45–6](#); League, [58](#); Liberation Army, [25](#); lists/parties, [37](#), [40–1](#), [59](#), [67](#), [77](#), [99](#), [166](#); Nationalism, [23](#), [30](#), [38–9](#), [42–3](#), [45](#), [48](#), [52](#), [57](#), [67](#), [92](#), [108](#), [154](#), [167](#), [169](#), [171](#); notables, [9](#); of Israel, [xi](#), [xii](#), [26ff.](#); United list, [69](#), [98–9](#), [166](#); university, [43](#), [98](#), [168](#); villages, [1](#), [43–4](#), [48–9](#), [55–7](#), [63](#), [69](#), [93](#), [108–9](#), [168](#)
Arafat, Yasser, [49](#), [113](#), [152](#), [171](#)
Arabakan, P.M. Necmettin, [66](#)
Archaeology, [75](#), [93](#)

Archbishop/Bishop, [5](#), [34](#), [57](#); of Acre, [21](#); of the Galilee, [22](#), [25](#); of Haifa, [22](#); of Nazareth, [8](#); of Tyre, [23](#)
 Archimandrite (*see also* Priest and Archbishop), [94](#)
 Armenian, [6](#), [23](#)
 'Artui, Azar, [40](#)
 'Ashur, Ali, [38](#)
 'Atiq, Nai'im, [46](#)
 Australia, [65](#)
 Austria, [3](#)
 Autonomy, [xii](#)
 Aviner, Gad, [96](#), [100](#), [115–16](#), [123](#) *Awqaf* (*see* *Waqf*)
 Aviyonah, M., [15–17](#)
 Aziz, Tariq, [39](#)

Ba'ath Party, [39](#)
 Baghdad, [5](#)
 Baibars, [8](#)
 Baldwin, [5](#)
 Banna, Hassan al, [178](#)
 Baptist, [30](#); School, [60](#); Southern, [23](#)
 Barak, Justice Aharon, [143](#), [147](#)
 Barak, P.M. Ehud, [xiv](#), [93ff.](#), [98–100](#), [164](#), [166](#), [169](#)
 Barakeh, Muhammed, [142](#)
 Baram, Uzi, [77](#)
 Batkish, Nadim, [40](#)
 Bedouins, [63](#), [168](#)
 Beersheba, [168](#)
 Beirut, Vilayet of, [10](#)
 Beit She'an, [5](#)
 Belgium, [166](#)
 Ben-Ami, Minister Shlomo, [99](#), [144](#)
 Ben-David, Judge, [143](#)
 Benedictines, [22](#)
 Bethlehem, [x](#), [4–5](#), [7](#), [10](#), [15](#), [22](#), [26](#), [78](#), [133](#), [154](#), [157](#), [170–1](#), [179](#)
 Bibi, Deputy Minister Yigal, [124](#), [140–1](#), [146](#), [162](#)
 Bible, [56](#), [80](#); heritage, [114](#); land, [72](#); New Testament, [1](#), [3](#); Old Testament, [2](#)
 Bishara, Azmi, [154](#)
 Bosnia, [120](#), [166](#)
 British, [11](#), [32](#), [46](#), [170](#); High Commissioner, [19](#), [21](#), [32](#), [121](#); Mandate, [xiii](#), [12](#), [15ff.](#), [27](#), [29](#), [32](#), [34](#), [42](#), [71](#), [118](#), [121–2](#), [125–6](#), [135](#), [138](#); troops, [12](#), [15](#), [25](#)
 Bush, President George II, [147](#), [179](#)
 Byzantine, [3](#), [29](#), [179](#); Empire, [5](#)

Caliph (ate), [19](#), [62](#)
 Canada, [166](#)
 Canossa, [78](#)
 Capucci, Archbishop, [57](#)
 Carmelites, [22](#)
 Catholic (*see also* Latin), [4](#), [22](#); Church, [22](#); Roman, [10](#), [29](#)
 Central Asia, [7](#)
 Chief Rabbinate, [167](#)
 Christ/Messiah/Jesus, [1–5](#), [29](#), [79](#), [157](#); Mensa, [30](#), [75](#)
 Christian (s), [9](#), [11](#), [15](#), [38](#), [67](#), [79–82](#); Association, [22](#), [34](#); denominations, [15](#), [20ff.](#), [33](#), [37](#), [52](#), [94](#), [119](#); Eastern, [6–7](#); festivals (*see also* Holidays), [28](#), [110](#); holy places, [1](#), [11](#), [29ff.](#); minorities, [10–11](#), [32](#), [38](#); of Israel, [xi](#), [xii](#), [xiii](#), [1](#), [87ff.](#), [133](#); of Lebanon/'People of Sunday', [xi](#), [68](#); of Palestine, [xi](#), [22](#); orders, [7–8](#); rule, [8](#); Christendom, [4](#), [7](#), [29](#), [57](#), [81](#), [95–6](#), [133](#), [170](#)
 Christiansen, Father Drew, [95](#)
 Christmas, [xi](#), [28](#), [64](#), [137](#)
 Church (*see also* Christians and Holy places), [3–4](#), [8–9](#), [11](#), [21–2](#), [28–9](#), [39](#), [57](#), [109](#); Arabization of, [41–2](#); Eastern, [23](#), [179](#); Episcopalian/Evangelical, [38](#); of Nativity, [22](#); of Scotland, [95](#); Protestant, [23](#); Western, [23](#)
 City Square/Plaza (Nazareth), [73](#), [80](#), [82ff.](#), [87ff.](#), [110](#), [117](#), [120ff.](#), [137ff.](#), [151](#), [155](#), [179](#)
 Clinton, President Bill, [xiv](#) Commission of Inquiry, [ix](#), [44](#), [96ff.](#), [99–101](#), [109–10](#), [115ff.](#), [135](#), [143](#), [161](#), [164](#), [172](#)
 Committee Against Confiscation of Land, [49](#)
 Committee for the Defense of the *Waqf*, [124](#)

Committee for the Protection of Arrested Demonstrators, [42](#)
Committee of Heads of Arab Councils (CHAC), [43](#), [48](#), [94](#), [130](#), [140](#), [143](#), [150](#) – [1](#), [153](#), [160](#); Chairman of (*see also* Hussein, Ibrahim Nimr), [140](#)
Committee of Three /Inquiry, [150](#) – [2](#), [154](#)
Committee of Seven, [130](#), [143](#), [160](#)
Communist (*see also* Hadash and Rakah), [xi](#), [xiv](#), [30](#) – [2](#), [37](#) – [44](#), [47](#) – [9](#), [51](#) – [2](#), [56](#) – [7](#), [59](#), [66](#), [69](#), [77](#) – [8](#), [88](#) – [90](#), [92](#), [98](#) – [9](#), [101](#), [107](#) – [8](#), [119](#), [143](#), [149](#), [153ff.](#), [169](#), [173](#), [179](#); bloc, [39](#); Central Committee, [42](#); Party, [38](#), [42](#), [148](#) – [9](#), [157](#), [171](#), [177](#); Secretary General, [169](#)
Companions (of the Prophet), [19](#)
Constantine, [3](#)
Constantinople (*see also* Istanbul), [113](#); Aya Sophia, [113](#)
Consulates, [10](#) – [11](#)
Copenhagen, Tivoli Park, [79](#)
Copts, [23](#), [30](#), [34](#), [58](#)
Crusades, [4](#) – [5](#), [6](#) – [8](#), [12](#) – [13](#), [22](#), [25](#), [28](#) – [9](#), [34](#), [119](#), [124](#), [179](#); new, [58](#), [170](#), [179](#)
Cyprus, [22](#)

Dahir al-'Umar, [10](#)
Damascus, [10](#), [126](#)
Dar-al-Islam, [20](#), [170](#)
Darwish, Sheikh Abdallah Nimr, [xiii](#), [19](#), [54](#) – [5](#), [58](#), [61](#) – [2](#), [64ff.](#), [94](#), [153](#), [156](#), [177](#)
David (Biblical), [3](#) – [4](#);
Day of Resurrection, [19](#)
De Bouillon, Godfrey, [5](#)
Dekel Operation, [25](#)
Democratic List/Front, [40](#), [47](#), [51](#), [123](#), [153ff.](#)
Demography, [11](#), [26ff.](#), [36](#) – [42](#), [80](#) – [1](#), [109](#) – [10](#), [171](#), [174](#)
Development Authority, [121](#), [135](#) *Dhimmi*, [6](#) – [7](#), [9](#), [27](#), [53](#), [60](#), [62](#), [112](#), [171](#)
Diodoros, Patriarch, [46](#)
Dominicans, [22](#)
Disturbances/riots (*see also* Violence), [xii](#) Drori, Amir, [100](#)
Druze, [8](#), [40](#) – [1](#), [169](#)

Edward VII, King, [30](#)
Egypt, [5](#), [8](#), [39](#), [46](#) – [7](#), [52](#) – [4](#), [58](#), [62](#), [66](#), [71](#), [79](#), [179](#)
Elections, campaigns, [53](#), [118](#), [119](#), [132](#); local, [43](#) – [4](#), [47](#) – [9](#), [53](#), [55](#) – [7](#), [59](#), [62](#), [69](#), [84](#), [87ff.](#), [93](#), [101](#) – [3](#), [110](#), [115](#), [119](#), [130](#), [139](#), [141](#), [150](#), [153](#) [155ff.](#), [162](#); national, [37](#) – [8](#), [44](#), [48](#) – [9](#), [53](#), [58](#) – [9](#), [61](#) – [2](#), [69](#), [77](#), [81](#), [89](#), [91ff.](#), [96](#) – [9](#), [111](#), [115](#), [117](#), [129](#), [141](#), [143](#), [157](#), [161ff.](#), [164](#), [168](#) – [9](#)
Englard, Justice Itzhak, [16](#), [33](#)
Episcopalian, [38](#)
Eretz Israel (*see also* Palestine), [15](#)
Etchegaray, Cardinal Roger, [78](#)
Europe (*see also* West), [10](#) – [11](#), [22](#), [179](#); East, [110](#)
Evangelical, [38](#)

Fahum, Attorney Walid, [146](#), [150](#) – [1](#); Clan, [121](#), Tahir, [42](#) – [3](#)
Fakhr, a-Din, [8](#) – [9](#)
Fasl al-Maqal, [162](#)
Fatimids, [5](#)
Fatwa, [134](#), [151](#) – [2](#), [175](#)
Finn, Consul James, [11](#)
Firman, [15](#), [24](#)
France, [20](#), [22](#), [46](#), [152](#)
Franciscan, [8](#), [22](#), [33](#); monastery, [29](#)
Franks, [6](#)
Frederick II, Emperor, [7](#)

Gabriel (the Angel), [3](#) – [4](#), [30](#); Church of St, [4](#), [29](#), [73](#)
Gal, Sharon, [176ff.](#)
Galilee, [2](#) – [3](#), [5](#) – [8](#), [10](#), [15](#), [21](#) – [3](#), [25](#) – [6](#), [31](#), [41](#) – [3](#), [55](#) – [6](#), [72](#), [75](#), [94](#), [104](#), [113](#), [178](#); Arab councils in, [43](#); Mother of, [48](#);
Lower, [1](#), [25](#), [29](#); Order of, [34](#); Prince of, [34](#); Upper, [26](#)
Gaza, [19](#), [48](#), [54](#), [66](#), [152](#), [177](#) – [8](#)

Germany, [3](#), [23](#), [25](#)
Ghali, Butrus, [39](#), [58](#)
God/Lord/Allah (*see also* Christ), [3](#) – [4](#), [16](#), [18](#) – [19](#), [68](#), [74](#)
Goral, Moshe, [100](#)
Gospels, [3](#) (*see also* individual Gospels)
Government ministers, Adviser on Arab Affairs, [88ff.](#); Finance, [77](#); Foreign Minister, [96](#); Infrastructure, [93](#), [137](#); Interior, [ix](#), [44](#), [80](#), [93](#), [95](#) – [6](#), [99](#), [101](#), [115](#), [129](#) – [30](#), [159](#), [160](#) – [2](#), [172](#), [179](#); Internal Security, [99](#), [137](#), [144](#); Prime Minister, [89](#), [169](#); Religious Affairs, [80](#), [96](#), [138ff.](#), [143](#) – [4](#), [151](#); Social Welfare, [80](#), [93](#); Transport, [72](#); Tourism, [71ff.](#), [93](#), [95](#), [98](#)
Greek, [3](#) – [5](#); Catholic, [10](#), [21](#) – [2](#), [42](#) – [3](#); Latin, [34](#); Orthodox, [10](#) – [11](#), [21](#), [29](#), [34](#), [37](#) – [8](#), [40](#) – [1](#), [43](#), [46](#); Priest, [12](#)
Greenberg, Danny, [89](#) – [90](#), [93](#) – [4](#), [98](#), [120](#), [154](#), [164](#)
Gulf (Persian/Arab), [49](#), [58](#)

Ha'aretz, [176](#)
Habash, George, [39](#), [57](#); Popular Front, [39](#)
Habibi, Emile, [38](#), [41](#) – [2](#)
Hadash (*see also* Communists and Rakah), [xi](#), [xiv](#), [43](#) – [5](#), [47](#) – [8](#), [52](#), [56](#), [59](#), [77](#), [88](#) – [9](#), [101](#) – [2](#), [104](#), [169](#)
Hadera, [89](#), [124](#)
Haifa, [xi](#), [xiii](#), [21](#) – [3](#), [34](#), [39](#), [42](#); Istiqlal Cemetery, [64](#)
Hajj, Professor Majid, [151](#)
Hakim, Archbishop George, [21](#), [34](#)
Halacha, [81](#)
Hamas, [xi](#), [xiii](#), [57](#), [62](#), [64](#), [66](#), [69](#); Charter, [10](#) – [20](#), [24](#), [114](#)
Hamed, Dhahil, [159](#)
Has'has, Salim, [150](#)
Hasmonean Tunnel (*see also* Temple Mount), [65](#)
Hassan, Ma'mun, [156](#)
Hassan, Prince, [113](#), [153](#)
Hawari, Nimr, [42](#)
Hawatmeh, Na'if, [39](#); Democratic Front, [39](#)
Hebrew language, [42](#), [100](#), [116](#)
Hebron, Islamic College, [55](#); Tomb of the Patriarchs/al Masjid al-Ibrahimi, [16](#) – [17](#)
Herzog, Haim, [48](#)
Heshin, Justice Mishael, [141](#)
Hijawi, Mufti Sa'id abd-al-Hafiz, [134](#)
Hittin, [5](#) – [6](#), [87](#)
Holiday/festival, Christian, (*see also* Christmas and Christians), [103](#), [110](#), [143](#); Jewish, [xi](#), [63](#); Muslim (*see also* Ramadan), [xi](#), [63](#), [65](#), [151](#)
Holocaust, [58](#)
Holy Land, [5](#), [7](#), [11](#), [15](#), [22](#), [53](#), [57](#), [78](#) – [9](#), [95](#), [133](#), [146](#), [170](#)
Holy places, [xii](#), [15ff.](#), [22](#) – [4](#), [32](#), [48](#), [53](#), [57](#), [65](#), [122](#), [170](#); Christian, (*see also* Holy Sepulchre), [1](#), [4](#) – [5](#), [7](#) – [8](#), [11](#), [22](#), [25](#), [28](#), [29ff.](#), [30](#), [32](#), [57](#), [71](#), [72ff.](#), [79](#), [154](#), [168](#), [170](#), [174](#); Jewish, (*see* Temple Mount and Western Wall); Law for the Protection of, [32](#) – [3](#); Muslim, [30](#), [32](#), [63](#) – [5](#), [79](#), [104](#), [110](#), [133](#), [137](#), [143](#) – [4](#), [151](#), [168](#), [170](#)
Holy Sepulchre, [22](#), [46](#); Curator of, [46](#)
Holy Spirit, [4](#)
Hospitallers, [8](#)
Hudna, [7](#)
Hussam, a-Din 'Umar, [5](#) – [6](#)
Hussein, Ibrahim Nimr (*see also* CHAC), [140](#), [146](#), [150](#) – [1](#), [153](#)
Husseini, Mufti Haj Amin, [18](#), [21](#)

Ibn al-Walid, Khalid, [57](#)
Ibn Hazm, [175](#)
Ibrahim, Attorney I., [146](#) – [7](#)
Ibrahim, Sheikh Abdallah, [156](#)
Imam, [176](#)
Immigrants, [165](#), [167](#), [174](#)
Imperialism, [45](#), [49](#)
India, [20](#)
Intifadah, [57](#) [11](#)
Iran (*see also* Persia), [177](#); revolution, [54](#)
Iraq, [19](#), [39](#), [49](#), [153](#)
Islam (*see also* Muslim), [15](#), [23](#), [32](#), [39](#)

Islamic, associations, [53](#), [55](#); college, [55](#), [63](#), [66](#); countries/Islamic world, [54](#), [65](#) – [6](#), [68](#), [110](#); fundamentalism/radicalism, [xii](#), [19](#) – [20](#), [49](#), [51ff.](#); history, [19](#), [64](#) – [5](#); institutions, [54](#); Liberation Party, [54](#); lists/parties, [51](#), [56](#) – [7](#), [62](#), [69](#), [156](#), [177](#) – [8](#); Movement in Israel, [ix](#), [xi](#), [xiii](#), [19](#), [51ff.](#), [108](#), [110ff.](#), [150](#) – [3](#); Northern Faction, [xi](#), [xiii](#), [55](#), [58](#), [61ff.](#), [177](#); Southern Faction, [xiii](#), [55](#), [58](#), [61ff.](#), [177](#); State, [67](#) – [8](#); Sport Association, [63](#); terrorism, [xi](#)

Islamikaze, [66](#), [70](#)

Israel, armed forces, [25](#), [81](#), [116](#); Attorney General, [139](#) – [40](#), [142](#); census, [27](#); Council for Higher Education, [43](#); court system, [133](#), [135ff.](#); Supreme Court/High Court of Justice, [80](#), [138](#) – [9](#), [141](#), [143](#), [159](#); military government (*see also* Government ministers), [25](#); National Planning Commission, [26](#); President of, [37](#), [48](#); Provisional Council, [37](#); Provisional Government (*see also* Government ministers), [25](#); security services, [153](#)

Israeli, Raphael, [96](#), [100](#), [115](#) – [16](#)

Istanbul (*see also* Constantinople), [9](#) – [10](#), [113](#)

Italy, [9](#), [22](#), [29](#), [152](#)

Jabal Jur, [6](#)

Jacob (Biblical), [00](#)

Jaffa, [7](#), [23](#), [63](#), [178](#)

Jarjura, Amin, [37](#); Clan, [40](#)

Jaljulya, [63](#)

Japan, [111](#)

Jazzar, Ahmed al, [10](#)

Jeraysi, Mayor Ramiz, [xi](#), [44](#), [51](#), [69](#), [71](#), [76](#), [77ff.](#), [88ff.](#), [99](#), [102](#), [104ff.](#), [120ff.](#), [139ff.](#), [150](#), [152](#), [153ff.](#), [169](#), [171](#), [176](#), [177](#) – [8](#)

Jerusalem, [xii](#), [4](#) – [7](#), [10](#) – [11](#), [15](#), [21](#) – [3](#), [26](#), [57](#), [65](#), [71](#), [77](#) – [8](#), [108](#), [133](#), [153](#), [159](#), [170](#) – [1](#), [179](#); East, [21](#), [27](#), [171](#); Festival of, [65](#); Hebrew University of, [96](#), [116](#); Kingdom of, [5](#); Mufti of, [122](#), [126](#); Patriarch of, [22](#); Syndrome, [71](#)

Jesuits, [22](#)

Jesus (*see also* Christ), [56](#) – [7](#), [74](#) – [5](#); Salisian Church of, [30](#)

Jews, [2](#) – [3](#), [9](#), [11](#), [15](#) – [16](#), [18](#), [23](#), [38](#), [117](#); of Russia, [165](#); Jewish entity, [57](#) – [8](#); Jewish National Fund, [47](#); Jewish State, [52](#) – [3](#), [55](#), [61](#), [81](#), [150](#), [179](#); Judaism, [24](#); Judaeo-Christian, [3](#), [67](#), [114](#); 'People of Saturday', [68](#); Ultra-Orthodox (*see also* Shas), [79ff.](#), [90](#), [162](#), [164](#) – [7](#), [169](#)

Jezreel Valley, [6](#)

Jihad, [7](#), [20](#), [54](#), [58](#), [175](#)

Jizya, [6](#), [9](#)

Jordan (*see also* Transjordan), [179](#); River, [5](#)

Joseph (the Carpenter), [1](#) – [4](#); St Joseph School, [4](#), [29](#), [34](#)

Joseph, Rabbi Ovadyah, [80ff.](#)

Jubran, Abdallah (*see also* Nazareth/City Manager), [76](#), [162](#)

Judges (Bible), [2](#)

Kabatieh, [11](#)

Kafr Bara, [56](#), [63](#), [151](#)

Kafr Kanna (Cana in Galilee), [5](#), [7](#), [22](#), [56](#) – [7](#), [61](#), [63](#), [94](#), [169](#)

Kafr Qara, [63](#)

Kafr Qassem, [54](#), [63](#), [156](#), [168](#)

Kahanism, [48](#), [50](#)

Kal'aji, Amram, [96](#), [100](#), [115](#)

Kardush, Mansur, [42](#) – [3](#)

Katzav, Moshe, [78](#), [93](#), [95](#), [100](#), [160](#) – [1](#)

Kaukji, [25](#)

Kfir, Aharon, [76](#)

Khamis, Saliba, [38](#)

Khatib, Kamal, [56](#) – [7](#), [61](#), [63](#)

Khatib, Tufiq, [175](#)

Khawarizm, [7](#)

Kibbutz, [25](#), [39](#)

Knesset, [37](#) – [8](#), [40](#), [42](#), [44](#) – [6](#), [49](#), [59](#), [61](#), [69](#), [77](#), [80](#), [105](#), [161](#); Arabs in, [43](#), [59](#), [63](#), [66](#), [69](#), [94](#), [104](#), [111](#), [161](#), [166](#)

Kollek, Teddy, [108](#)

Kul-al-Arab, [60](#), [90](#)

Kussa, Elias, [42](#)

Kuwait, [49](#)

Labor Party/Mapai, [37](#), [40](#), [44](#), [47](#) – [8](#), [77](#), [92](#) – [3](#), [98](#) – [100](#), [157](#), [164](#), [166](#), [168](#) – [9](#), [173](#)

Lamentations (Bible), [2](#)

Land, Authority, [74](#), [91](#), [136](#), [138ff.](#), [143](#), [151](#) – [2](#), [161](#); confiscation of, [41](#), [47](#), [49](#), [112](#), [155](#), [165](#) – [6](#); Day, [43](#), [47](#); Fund, [47](#);

Ottoman, [18](#); ownership, [29](#), [61](#), [110](#), [121](#), [130](#), [135ff.](#), [142](#); *Miri* (see also *Waqf*), [18](#) – [19](#); *Mulk* (see also *Waqf*), [18](#) – [19](#)
 Lapid, Ephraim, [96](#), [100](#), [115](#) – [16](#)
 Latin Church (see also Catholic), [22](#), [34](#), [40](#)
 Lazarites, [22](#)
 League of Nations, [12](#), [18](#)
 Lebanon, [xi](#), [9](#), [22](#) – [3](#), [34](#), [52](#), [65](#), [68](#); civil war, [119](#)
 Leon, Moshe, [100](#)
 Levant (see also Middle East), [10](#)
 Likkud, [77](#), [89](#) – [90](#), [92ff.](#), [129](#), [143](#), [154](#), [157](#), [161](#), [164](#)
 Lipkin-Shahak, Amnon, [145](#)
 Livorno, [9](#)
 Lod, [63](#)
 London (see also British), [11](#), [78](#), [95](#)
 Louis IX, [7](#) – [8](#)
 Luke (see also Gospels), [3](#) – [4](#), [29](#)
 Lutheran, [23](#)

Main, Reverend Alan, [95](#)
 Maktab Harbi (Military Academy), [120](#) – [1](#)
 Malmesbury, Earl of, [11](#)
 Maman, Judge, [143](#)
 Mamluk, [8](#)
 Mansur, As'ad, [125](#)
 Mansur, Atallah, [60](#)
 Mapam Party, [40](#)
 Maqsud, Clovis, [58](#)
 Maronite (s), [9](#), [22](#), [34](#); Church, [30](#)
 Martyr/shahid, [17](#), [46](#), [87](#)
 Marxism, [39](#), [41](#) – [2](#), [46](#)
 Masalha, Nawwaf, [163](#)
 Mary (Bible) [4](#), [29](#); St Mary's Well, [4](#), [29](#), [73](#) – [4](#)
 Matthew (see also Gospels), [2](#), [12](#)
 Meggido/Armageddon, [78](#); Battle of [25](#), [78](#) – [9](#)
 Meir, P.M. Golda, [44](#)
 Mensa Christi, [30](#)
 Meridor, Dan, [78](#)
 Metropolitan (see also Priest and Archbishop), [21](#)
 Middle East (see also Levant), [29](#), [34](#), [38](#), [49](#), [71](#) – [2](#), [166](#); dispute, [51](#), [54](#) *Mihrab*, [125](#) – [6](#)
 Milet, [10](#), [23](#)
 Mishmar Ha'emek, [25](#)
 Missionaries, [10](#)
Mitzpim, [112](#)
 Modernization, [10](#) – [11](#)
 Mongol/Tatar, [8](#)
 Monitorig Committee (see also CHAC), [43](#)
 Monitz, Judge Nehama, [139](#), [142](#)
 Moscow, [21](#), [41](#), [46](#)
 Mosque (see also Holy places), [20](#), [28](#) – [9](#), [48](#), [53](#) – [4](#), [60](#) – [1](#), [63](#), [83](#), [97](#), [103](#) – [6](#), [112](#), [117](#), [124](#) – [5](#), [156](#), [167](#), [178](#); Al-Aqsa, [65](#);
 Nabi Sa'in, [61](#), [91](#); Peace, [30](#), [124](#); Shihab a-Din, [xi](#), [84](#), [87ff.](#), [113](#), [136ff.](#), [159](#) – [60](#), [170](#), [174](#), [176](#), [179](#); White, [30](#), [121](#)
 Moyal, Judge Dina, [138](#) – [9](#), [141](#) – [2](#)
 Mount Carmel, [8](#)
 Mount of the Precipice, [75](#)
 Mount Tabor, [5](#), [7](#)
 Mu'ammam, Elias, [42](#)
Mu'azzin, [28](#), [68](#)
 Mubarak, President Husni, [xiv](#) Mudhaffar a-Din, [6](#)
 Mufti, [152](#), of Amman, [126](#), [134](#); of Jerusalem, [18](#), [126](#), [134](#)
 Musallah, [17](#), [125](#) – [6](#), [137](#); al Marwani, [65](#), [70](#)
 Muslim (see also Islam), [11](#); Board, [47](#); Brothers, [43](#), [53](#) – [4](#), [65](#), [179](#); countries, [18](#), [54](#); festivals, [28](#), [60](#), [151](#); heritage, [52](#), [63ff.](#),
 [67](#); Islamic world, [xii](#), [5](#), [7](#), [57](#), [171](#); law, [9](#); minorities, [15](#); rule, [5](#) – [6](#), [16](#), [34](#); Supreme Council, [18](#); Youth Movement, [54](#)

Nabi Sa'in, [1](#), [30](#), [91](#)

Nablus, [6](#), [10](#), [11](#)
Nakbah, [xii](#), [63](#)
Napoleon, [10](#)
Naqqara, Hanna, [38](#), [42](#)
Nasser, 'abd-al, [39](#)
Nasser, Sheikh Fat'hi 'Ali, [152](#) – [3](#)
Nathaniel (Bible), [3](#)
National Religious Party, [115](#), [162](#)
Natur, Sheikh Ahmed, [140](#) – [1](#), [150ff.](#), [154](#)
Nazarene, [2](#), [3](#), [37](#) – [8](#), [73](#), [140](#), [155](#)
Nazareth, City Council, [xiii](#), [44](#) – [5](#), [47](#), [51](#), [63](#), [69](#), [82](#) – [4](#), [88](#), [94](#), [96](#), [99](#), [101ff.](#), [114](#), [116ff.](#), [156ff.](#); City Hall/municipality, [45](#) – [6](#), [76](#), [94](#), [99](#), [114](#), [152](#); Democratic Front (*see also* Hadash), [44](#), [47](#); mayor of, [xii](#), [xiii](#), [38](#), [42](#), [44](#), [49](#), [51](#), [56](#), [61](#), [83](#) – [4](#), [88](#), [94](#), [99](#), [101ff.](#), [114](#), [120ff.](#), [139ff.](#), [169](#); Old City Mansions, [30](#); Progressive Movement, [47](#); summer camps, [48](#), [56](#); United list, [123](#), [156](#), [176](#) – [7](#); Upper Nazareth, [1](#), [25](#) – [6](#), [29](#), [31](#), [41](#), [112](#); *Waqf* Board/Committee, [120ff.](#); Workers' League, [40](#); Nazir (*Waqf* Trustee), [2](#), [82](#)
Nazareth 2000, [71ff.](#), [89](#), [93](#), [97](#), [108](#) – [9](#), [120](#) – [1](#), [129](#), [137](#), [151](#) – [2](#), [154](#) – [5](#), [157](#) *Nedarim*, [2](#)
Negev, [63](#), [168](#)
Netanyahu, Prime Minister Benjamin, [78](#), [80](#), [89](#) – [90](#), [91](#), [93ff.](#), [120](#), [153](#), [161](#), [164](#)
New York, [111](#)
Normans, [175](#)
Notre Dame de l'Effroi, [30](#)
Numbers (Bible), [2](#)

Order-in-Council (1924), [17](#), [23](#), [32](#) – [3](#), [138](#), [144](#)
Oren, Ilan, [157](#)
Oslo, [98](#); Process /Accords (*see also* Peace Accords), [62](#), [68](#), [71](#), [148](#)
Ottoman, [8](#) – [10](#), [12](#), [15](#), [18](#), [22](#) – [3](#), [25](#), [28](#), [30](#), [32](#) – [3](#), [75](#), [87](#), [120](#), [123](#), [125](#) – [6](#), [170](#)

Pakistan, [52](#)
Palestine, [xi](#), [xii](#), [xiv](#), [5](#), [7](#) – [10](#), [12](#), [18](#), [71](#), [165](#); Arab, [22](#); Authority, [66](#), [69](#), [93](#), [113](#), [152](#), [157](#); heritage, [43](#), [46](#), [52](#); Liberation Theology, [46](#); Mandatory, [32](#), [34](#); National Charter, [69](#); nationalism, [15](#), [21](#) – [3](#), [39](#), [41](#), [46](#) – [7](#), [52](#), [55](#), [62](#); Palestinian Liberation Organization (PLO), [39](#), [47](#); Poetry, [45](#); Refugees, [25](#) – [6](#), [135](#); right of return, [41](#); state of, [44](#), [62](#), [178](#)
Pasha, [11](#); Tahir, [11](#) – [12](#)
Patriarch (*see also* Priest), [11](#), [21](#), [22](#), [46](#); of Jerusalem, [22](#)
Paul (Bible), [2](#)
Pax Britannica (*see also* British), [15](#)
Pax Islamica (*see* Dar-al-Islam)
Peace, [45](#), [48](#), [63](#) – [4](#), [73](#), [118](#), [148](#), [162](#); Mosque, [124](#); negotiations (*see also* Oslo), [41](#), [92](#), [165](#); process (*see also* Oslo), [xi](#), [xiv](#), [58](#), [68](#), [92](#) – [3](#); treaty, [71](#)
Persia/Iran, [3](#), [52](#)
Pilgrimage, [1](#), [5](#), [7](#) – [8](#), [11](#), [17](#), [21](#), [28](#), [30](#), [34](#), [71ff.](#), [108](#), [128](#), [174](#);
Pilgrims' Road, [74](#)
Police, [42](#), [45](#), [90](#) – [1](#), [100](#), [102](#) – [4](#), [111](#), [120](#), [137](#), [151](#) – [2](#), [161](#), [173](#)
Pope, [78](#) – [9](#), [108](#), [131](#), [171](#)
Popular Front (*see also* Habash), [42](#)
Port Sa'id, [46](#)
Portugal, [20](#)
Praver, J., [6](#) – [7](#), [13](#)
Press/media, Arabic, [48](#), [60](#), [151](#); Islamic, [152](#) – [3](#); Israeli, [46](#), [60](#), [78](#) – [9](#), [111](#), [120](#), [135](#), [137](#), [158](#), [167](#), [176](#); international, [78](#), [111](#); Western, [79](#)
Priests/clerics, [12](#), [18](#), [21](#), [27](#), [46](#), [52](#), [54](#), [125](#)
Progressive List for Peace, [43](#), [47](#) – [8](#), [49](#), [149](#)
Prophet, Jewish, [2](#); of Islam, [7](#), [178](#)
Protestants, [23](#), [34](#), [41](#)

Qadi, [11](#), [140](#), [150](#), [167](#)
Qalansawa, [140](#), [150](#)
Qishleh, [75](#)
Qut'b, Sayyed, [67](#)

Rabbi, Chief, [80](#)
Rabinowitz, Danny, [27](#)

Rahat, [168](#)
Rakah (*see also* Communists and Hadash), [xiv](#), [38 – 9](#), [41](#), [43 – 4](#), [47](#), [48 – 9](#), [52](#), [89](#); Central Committee of, [38](#); Secretary General of, [38](#)
Ramadan, [xi](#), [28](#), [65](#), [137](#)
Rameh, [48](#)
Ramlah, [63](#), [178](#)
Ramon, Minister Haim, [144](#)
Right of return, for Jews, [178](#); for Palestinians (*see also* Palestine), [178](#)
Ryan, Sheikh Kamal, [151](#)
Rome/Vatican, [21 – 2](#), [78](#)
Roman Catholics, [29](#)
Rushdie, Salman, [120](#)
Russia, [11](#), [21](#), [165](#), [174](#)
Russian war, [12](#)

Sabbath, [9](#); ‘People of Saturday’ (*see* Jews)
Sabri, Sheikh ‘Akrama, [00](#)
Sa’d, George, [40](#)
Saddam, Hussein, [58](#)
Sadeq, Walid, [163](#)
Safed, [10](#), [178](#)
Saladin, [5](#), [6 – 8](#), [22](#), [28 – 9](#), [57](#), [87](#), [123](#), [178 – 9](#)
Salah, Sheikh Ra’id, [xiii](#), [20](#), [55 – 6](#), [61ff.](#), [94](#), [151](#), [153](#), [156 – 7](#), [173](#), [177](#)
Salesian Church, [30](#)
Samara, [154](#)
Samaria, [6](#)
Samson, [2](#)
Sani’, M. K. Talib a, [156](#)
Sanjaks, [10](#); of Jerusalem, [10](#)
Sarayah headquarters, [75](#)
Sawt al-Haqq wal-Huriyya, [58](#), [60](#), [61](#), [63](#), [65](#), [151](#)
Scots, [23](#)
Sephardic, [80ff.](#)
Serbian, [120](#); ‘Pig’, [120](#)
Shafir, Attorney Dan, [89](#), [90 – 1](#), [124](#), [138 – 9](#), [141](#)
Shahar, Yigal (district commissioner), [124](#), [129](#), [146](#), [154 – 5](#), [158](#)
Shapiro, Judge Ron, [143ff.](#) Sharansky, Nathan, [144](#)
Shararah, ‘Umar, [56](#), [177](#)
Shari’a, court, [18](#), [82](#); law, [18 – 20](#), [59](#), [81 – 2](#), [107](#), [126](#), [151](#); scholars of, [19](#); Sharm al-Sheikh, [xi](#), [xiv](#); Accords, [xi](#), [xiv](#)
Sharon, Ariel, [93](#), [179](#)
Shas Party, [80ff.](#), [90 – 5](#), [98 – 9](#), [115](#), [129](#), [164](#), [169](#)
Shbat, Ibrahim, [40](#)
Shefar’am, [7](#), [39](#), [94](#), [111](#); mayor of, [153](#)
Shehadeh, Attorney ‘Aziz, [124](#)
Shehadeh, Nethaniel, [43](#)
Sheikh, [19](#), [20](#), [24](#), [55 – 6](#)
Shihab a-Din, [6](#), [113](#), [150 – 1](#), [176](#), [178](#); Committee for the Defence of, [90 – 1](#); controversy, [30](#), [87ff.](#), [101ff.](#), [120ff.](#), [135ff.](#), [1552ff.](#); group/faction, [150](#); Mosque, [xi](#), [153](#), [176](#); Tomb, [28](#), [87](#), [121 – 3](#), [140](#), [143 – 4](#), [152](#)
Shu’ali, Attorney, [147](#)
Shufani, Father Emile, [46](#)
Sicily, [175](#)
Sinai, [xiv](#)
Singer, Mr, [159](#)
Siniora, Hanna, [57](#)
Socialism, [3](#), [9](#), [40](#)
Solomon, King, stables, [65](#)
Sons of the Village (*abna al-Balad*), [43](#), [50](#)
Soviets (*see also* Russia and Communists), [21](#), [39](#), [49](#)
Spain, [20](#)
St Anthony’s Church, [30](#)
Status quo, [15 – 16](#), [21](#), [23](#), [32 – 3](#), [130](#), [139](#), [162](#), [170](#), [172](#)
Students’ Committee, [49](#)
Sudan, [52](#)

Suez War, [46](#)
Sultan (*see also* Ottomans), [10](#), [15](#) *Sunday Times*, [78](#)
Sunni, [32](#)
Swissa, Minister Elie, [93](#) – [5](#), [100](#), [115](#), [164](#)
Synagogue (*see also* Holy places), [3](#) – [4](#), [9](#), [75](#); Church, [4](#), [29](#)
Syria, [5](#), [8](#), [19](#), [25](#), [46](#), [54](#), [92](#), [119](#)
Switzerland, [3](#)

Tab'uni, Ayman al, [153](#)
Taibars, 'Ala' a-Din, [8](#)
Taibeh, [163](#)
Talmud, [80](#)
Tamra, [48](#)
Tancred, [4](#) – [5](#), [12](#)
Taqi a-Din 'Umar, [6](#)
Tel 'Ajul, [7](#)
Tel Aviv, [55](#)
Templars, [7](#) – [8](#)
Temple Mount, [17](#), [65](#); Second Temple, [24](#)
Terrorism (*see also* Violence), [xi](#), [xiii](#) Tiberias, [xi](#), [xiii](#), [5](#), [10](#), [143](#), [178](#); Court of Law, [143](#); Lake, [17](#)
Tobler Map, [125](#)
Tourism, [1](#), [30](#) – [1](#), [64](#) – [5](#), [71ff.](#), [77](#), [89](#), [106](#), [108](#), [126](#), [154](#) – [5](#), [169](#), [173](#); Corporation, [71](#) ff.; Ministry of, [73](#), [93](#), [95](#)
Transjordan/Jordan, [22](#), [52](#), [54](#), [62](#), [71](#), [113](#), [177](#)
Triangle, [168](#)
Tsimhony, Dafna, [40](#) [70](#)
Tsipori, [7](#)
Tubas, [11](#)
Tubi, M.K. Tufiq, [38](#), [41](#)
Tuma, Dr Emile, [38](#)
Tur'an, [94](#)
Turkey (*see also* Ottomans), [9](#), [25](#), [66](#), [87](#); Welfare Party, [66](#)
Tyre, Archbishop of, [23](#)

Ulpan Akiva, [100](#), [116](#)
'Umar, Caliph Ibn al, Khattab, [19](#), [57](#), [178](#) – [9](#)
Umm al-Fahm, [xiii](#), [20](#), [55](#), [60](#), [63](#), [69](#), [107](#), [111](#), [137](#), [151](#), [156](#), [168](#), [177](#)
Umma, [62](#)
United Nations, [58](#); Partition Plan, [98](#); Security Council, [58](#)
Unbelievers, [16](#), [60](#), [179](#)
Urban Planning Board/Commission, [167](#) – [8](#), [179](#); city/local, [84](#), [129](#), [167](#); district/regional, [84](#), [124](#), [129](#), [136ff.](#), [143](#) – [4](#), [145](#) – [6](#)
'Usfiyya, [40](#)
Usrat al-Jihad, [54](#), [58](#)

Vatican (*see also* Rome), [22](#), [78](#) – [9](#), [96](#), [113](#), [114](#), [133](#), [147](#), [152](#), [170](#) – [1](#), [174](#), [179](#)
Venise, [78](#)
Vilayet, [10](#) – [11](#); of Beirut, [10](#)
Vilna'j, Minister Matan, [144](#)
Violence/unrest (*see also* Terrorism) [16](#), [20](#), [42](#), [45](#), [54](#), [68](#), [83](#), [88](#), [92](#), [94](#), [101](#), [4](#), [110](#) – [11](#), [113](#) – [4](#), [127](#) – [8](#), [130](#) – [1](#), [135](#), [143](#), [151](#) – [2](#), [160](#), [172](#) – [3](#), [175](#), [178](#)

Waqf (pi. *Awqaf*), [xi](#), [17](#) if., [32](#), [42](#), [47](#), [53](#), [59](#), [61](#) – [5](#), [82](#) – [4](#), [87ff.](#), [94](#) – [5](#), [98](#), [107](#), [110](#), [120ff.](#), [135ff.](#), [152](#), [167](#) – [8](#), [170](#); *ahli/dhuriyya*, [17](#); Committee/Board, [20](#), [49](#), [83](#) – [4](#), [87ff.](#), [120ff.](#), [130](#), [135ff.](#), [151](#), [160](#); Khayri 'Am, [17](#); Ministry of, [17](#); *Nazir*, [18](#); Reform (1965), [83](#), [122](#), [135](#)
War, [53](#), [90](#), [165](#); First World, [xiii](#), [12](#), [15](#), [25](#); Second World, [23](#); 1948 (Independence), [25](#) – [7](#), [34](#), [63](#); 1956 (Sinai/Suez), [46](#); 1967 (Six Day), [16](#), [27](#), [32](#), [54](#); 1973 (Ramadan/Yom Kippur), [46](#) – [7](#)
Washington, [95](#), [179](#)
Weizman, President Chaim, [37](#)
West, [9](#) – [10](#), [46](#), [67](#), [79](#), [98](#), [108](#), [111](#), [113](#), [119](#), [133](#), [174](#)
Western powers, [22](#), [27](#); secularism, [81](#)
West Bank, [xi](#), [48](#), [54](#), [57](#), [178](#)
Western Wall (*see also* Temple Mount), [16](#)
White House, [179](#)

Wye Agreement, [69](#), [98](#)

Yinnon, Abraham, [45](#)

Yassin, Sheikh Ahmed, [19](#), [66](#)

Yedioth Aharonot, [79](#)

Zakat Board, [63](#)

Zaken, Motti (Adviser for Arab Affairs), [89](#), [95](#), [100](#)

Zaki, Attorney Kamil, [160](#)

Zaydan, Muhammed, [160](#)

Zebabdeh, [11](#)

Zionism, [15](#), [21](#), [23](#), [28](#), [34](#), [41](#), [45](#), [52](#), [66](#), [81](#), [140](#), [157](#), [167](#), [173](#); anti-Zionism, [57](#), [80](#), [112](#)

Zionist entity, [59](#); ideology, [40](#)

Zu'bi, (Clan), [37](#), [40](#); 'Abd-al-'Aziz, [40](#); Ahmed Hamada (*see also* Abu Nawwaf), [91](#), [159](#); Judge, [136](#); Saif a-Din, [37](#), [47](#)

Zyad, Tufiq, [38](#), [42](#), [44ff.](#), [51](#) – [2](#), [56](#), [59](#), [61](#), [71ff.](#), [76](#), [102](#), [105](#), [108](#), [136](#), [148](#), [177](#); Misba', [154](#); poetry, [45ff.](#)