

Manipulated protest: Mosque dispute in Nazareth

by [Alain Epp Weaver](#) in the [December 22, 1999](#) issue

For two November days, pilgrims were turned away from major Christian shrines throughout Palestine-Israel. Church doors were closed to protest Israel's decision to allow construction of a mosque next to the Basilica of the Annunciation in Nazareth. For tourists it was only a temporary inconvenience, but for Christians and Muslims in the Holy Land it was a tragic sign of the weakening of their historically strong bond.

The dispute began in 1997 when Nazareth decided to create a public square next to the Basilica of the Annunciation in anticipation of millennial tourism. Anyone who has navigated the narrow, crowded streets of Nazareth can appreciate the need for such a public space.

But plans for the plaza quickly broke down. The Islamic Movement in Israel, branded by its opponents as "fundamentalist," insisted that the land was a Muslim religious trust, or waqf, and the gravesite of the medieval Muslim cleric Shihab al-Din, a relative of the famed opponent of the crusaders, Salah al-Din.

The Islamic Movement demanded that a mosque be built on this waqf land. Some even spoke of minarets that would tower over the basilica, one of the largest churches in the Middle East. Soon the Nazareth Municipal Council, on which the Islamic Movement-affiliated United List had a slim majority, and Nazareth's Christian mayor were locked in confrontation. The Islamic Movement erected a protest tent on the site of the proposed plaza. Tensions reached the boiling point at Easter when Christians were attacked by mosque supporters, setting off a spate of mutual reprisals.

In the fall an Israeli court ruled that almost none of the disputed land was Muslim waqf. The Israeli government nevertheless proceeded to advance what it termed a compromise solution in which the Muslim protest tent would be dismantled, a cornerstone for the mosque laid on November 23, and, after the millennial celebrations, a smaller mosque built, with the design determined by a committee

made up of representatives of all concerned parties.

To the majority of Palestinian Christians, this compromise constituted a legal ratification of an illegal land-grab. "It feels at times that this gesture is one of sheer defiance and power," said Armenian Christian leader Harry Hagopian. Many Christians and Muslims also voiced the suspicion that Israel, following the time-honored strategy of divide and conquer, was using the mosque dispute as a wedge to further divide Palestinians.

The plan for the mosque, it should be noted, does not enjoy universal support among Palestinian Muslims. Appealing to the strong Christian-Muslim bonds in Palestine since the days of Omar ibn al-Khattab in the seventh century, the Supreme Muslim Council urged Nazareth's Christians and Muslims to thwart Israeli attempts to sow discord, and asked that the cornerstone ceremony be canceled. The Palestinian Authority also called on Nazareth Muslims to postpone the laying of the cornerstone.

Other Muslim leaders in the Middle East expressed concern over the planned mosque. Saudi Arabian Crown Prince Abdullah Bin Abduhl-Aziz announced that he was prepared to finance a mosque anywhere in Nazareth except at the disputed site. The Egyptian mufti said, "Insistence on establishing [the mosque] at its present site is of no value and does not carry the grace of God and of his prophet Muhammad." He proclaimed that true Muslims would be forbidden to pray at such a mosque.

In early November the patriarchs of the Latin (Roman Catholic), Greek Orthodox and Armenian Orthodox communions, along with the Franciscans, declared that their churches in Palestine/Israel would close their doors on the 22nd and 23rd of the month in protest of the Israeli plan. The patriarchs appealed to the long history of good Christian-Muslim relations in Nazareth. "Ever since the period of Ottoman rule," they wrote, "the city has lived in an atmosphere of peaceful coexistence between Christians and Muslims." A shared belief in Jesus' virgin birth united the two faiths, they noted. The decision to allow the mosque to be built, however, was "a clear discrimination against the Christian community in the Galilee" and "an abandonment of the rule of law by the government." Future measures, church officials hinted, might include closing the churches at Christmas and canceling Pope John Paul II's planned visit in March—moves which would decrease the influx of tourists.

When November 22 arrived, Christian leaders tried hard to make people aware that the church closures were a protest against Israeli policy. Typical was a Melkite priest from Nazareth, who insisted that "our action is not against Muslims" but against an Israeli government decision to reward some Muslims for what appeared to Christians to be an illegal move. This theme was picked up repeatedly not only by church officials but also by the Vatican. Many Christian leaders argued that they had no inherent objections to mosques close to churches, pointing to the minarets adjacent to the Church of the Holy Sepulcher and the Church of the Nativity, but that they did object to government support for illegal attempts to claim land.

Not all churches heeded the patriarchal call for church closures. The Nazareth Orthodox Council, for example, kept its own basilica of the annunciation open. Closing churches, council leaders asserted, would only exacerbate tensions between Christians and Muslims.

Some Christian leaders were deeply critical of the church closures. Naim Ateek, director of the Sabeel Liberation Theology Center, decried the fact that Israel had "managed to turn a problem between the state of Israel and some Muslims into a problem between Christians and Muslims." By closing the churches, argued Ateek, Christians fell into a trap, as the closures would inevitably be perceived as anti-Muslim. "It's going to go down in history as if we were against the building of the mosque" instead of against the process, he lamented.

Why, he wondered, didn't the churches shut their doors in protest of the ongoing Israeli closure of Jerusalem, which prevents the vast majority of Palestinians from visiting the city's Christian and Muslim holy places? Or to protest the demolition of Palestinian homes? Or as a witness against Israel's construction of the illegal Har Homa settlement on the confiscated lands of the Christian village of Beit Sahour?

According to a Christian leader in Gaza, the patriarchal decision to close the churches was fundamentally flawed. As a small minority within the wider Palestinian community, he warned, Christians must avoid moves which might be construed as anti-Muslim and thereby further Israeli attempts to deepen divisions within Palestinian society. "We must be wise as serpents and innocent as doves," he counseled. "Every Palestinian Christian should take a stone and go up to Nazareth to build this mosque and be done with it."

When it suits its purposes, the Israeli government tries to portray the Palestinian Christian community as threatened by the Muslim majority. For example, a 1998

Israeli government report—uniformly derided as completely lacking in merit by human rights groups otherwise critical of the Palestinian Authority—decided what it claimed were Palestinian Muslim abuses against Christians. Such propaganda is contradicted by the warm relationships between Palestinian Christians and Muslims and by the many Muslims who questioned the construction of the mosque.