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ANTI-ISRAEL INFLUENCE IN AMERICAN CHURCHES

A BACKGROUND REPORT

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SOURCES OF ANTI-ISRAEL SENTIMENT

American Christians have long been divided in their views on Middle Eastern affairs. Since before Israel was actually founded, approval and disapproval of the Jewish state have existed side by side in the church community. Israel has not lacked friends and supporters; year after year, opinion polls have shown the American public to be much more sympathetic to her than to her Arab antagonists, and many of the nation's church leaders have spoken out in her behalf, singly or in concert. Yet at the same time, an anti-Israel, pro-Arab attitude has been much in evidence in certain segments of American Christianity.

A pro-Arab disposition is strongly in evidence among Protestant denominations with long-standing involvement in missions to the Arab Middle East; in churches and church-related groups engaged in aiding Arab refugees; among certain left-wing "liberationist" ideologues; and in communions with predominantly Arab constituencies, whether Catholic or Eastern Orthodox. In these quarters, champions of the Arab cause often influence church policies and organizational resolutions far beyond their numbers, giving church groups a pro-Arab tilt by constantly pressing for statements critical of or detrimental to Israel.

In this report, certain criteria have been used to determine whether a group or an action is considered anti-Israel. Concern for the welfare of Palestinian refugees does not, in itself, constitute hostility to Israel. Nor does appreciation of Arab culture, interest in religious dialogue with Islam, or disapproval of specific policies of the Israeli Government. What constitutes anti-Israel bias is the unequal application of standards -- for example, criticizing Israel for military reprisals without taking note of the hostile actions that provoked them, or calling upon Israel to recognize the Palestinian Liberation Organization (PLO), still publicly committed to her destruction, without the contingent demand that the PLO recognize Israel's right to exist as a sovereign state. Bias may also reveal itself in an unbalanced rendering of history. For example, Israel alone may be blamed for the existence of Palestinian refugees with no acknowledgment that their displacement is also the result of Arab-initiated wars against Israel, or that an equal number of Jewish refugees were forced to flee Arab countries without compensation for homes or property.

There is also a potent anti-Jewish legacy in Christian tradition which sometimes comes into play when Israel is being discussed; in such instances anti-Israel sentiment takes on an anti-Jewish coloration.

The following pages describe the major sources of anti-Israel, pro-Arab sentiment within the organized Christian community in the U.S., the church institutions on which Arab sympathizers exert significant influence, the religious organizations which they have created or with which they are allied, and the ways in which they seek to win American public sympathy for their views through religious channels.

church groups helped found the Institute of Arab-American Affairs to combat Zionism. During the next two years what was named the Anglo-American Committee of Inquiry studied the Jewish homeland question. Testimony of American mission-related individuals was anti-Zionist, although one United States churchman, representing conservative Christians who saw a separate Jewish home as a fulfillment of biblical prophecy, was pro-Zionist.²

Originally, Christian antagonism to the idea of a Jewish state rested as much on theological and religious as on political grounds (as did the few instances of support for the idea). The view that the Church, the "new Israel," had superseded the "old Israel" and thereby inherited the biblical promises was commonly cited in responses to early Zionist initiatives. So was the notion that the Jews had been condemned to eternal dispersion because they had rejected the messiahship of Jesus. Since the State of Israel has come into being, Western Christians hostile to the Jewish state seldom resort to these theological arguments, although Arab Christian leaders invoke them frequently.

Even in the West, traces of the pervasive anti-Jewish polemic in Christian tradition, and of the triumphalism that interprets Judaism and Jewish history through Christian eyes, still surface from time to time in comments about Israel, in anti-Jewish attitudes, and especially in the use of double standards of morality. Jewish (or Israeli) behavior is judged against a standard of absolute perfection, and deviations from this idealized norm are deemed proof of utter sinfulness; the failures and shortcomings of others are judged more pragmatically. Quaker Life, for example, combined almost all of these elements in an article clearly hostile to Jews and Judaism, as well as to Israel.³

In the Roman Catholic community of the U.S., things are somewhat similar. Some leaders with a background of philanthropic or educational service in the Arab Middle East actively promote anti-Israel positions. Foremost among them is the Reverend Joseph L. Ryan, S.J., who is Rector of Holy Cross College in Worcester, Massachusetts, a member of the Center for the Study of the Modern Arab World at St. Joseph's University in Beirut, and a former Vice President of Al Hikma University in Baghdad. He was the founder and first President of Americans for Justice in the Middle East and is presently associated with the Middle East Resource Center, both anti-Israel organizations.

Father Ryan has made a number of nationwide speaking tours, lecturing at colleges and universities. His main themes have been that the PLO deserves support because there is a difference between the "violence of the oppressed" and the "violence of the oppressor"; that non-Jews are "second-class citizens in Israel"; that peace is impossible unless Israel withdraws from the territories occupied in 1967; and that a Palestinian state must be established on the West Bank and in Gaza. He does not believe, he has said, that Israel should have been created or should exist.

2. Joseph Grabill, Protestant Diplomacy and the Near East (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1971), pp. 307-8

3. "Promised Land," by Harold Smuck, Quaker Life, September 1976.

ARAB CHURCHES

Though Protestant missionaries made a number of Arab converts in the last century, and though Arab Protestant Churches and congregations exist in the Middle East and the U.S., the overwhelming majority of Christian Arabs are Eastern Orthodox or Catholics of the Eastern Rite. This state of affairs ultimately stems from two major schisms in Christianity. Some Eastern churches, including the Armenian Apostolic Church, the Coptic Church of Egypt and the Syrian Orthodox Church of Antioch, have stood apart from the rest of the Christian churches since the fifth century in a dispute over the question of the two natures (divine and human) of Jesus. The great schism of 1054 separated Byzantine (Orthodox) Christianity from Western Latin Christianity.

Communities of Arab Christians have existed in the United States for some time, but only in recent years have some of their leaders aggressively pursued political goals on Middle East issues. Not all American Christians of Middle Eastern background are against Israel; thus, many Lebanese support Israel as the defender and ally of the beleaguered Christian community in Lebanon. But those who do oppose Israel are a potent new influence in organized American Christianity. They have used public relations techniques skillfully and on occasion have made common cause with Moslem leaders. From their leadership positions in their own churches, they have pressed non-Arab church groups and agencies for anti-Israel statements, and have sought to influence the U.S. Government against Israel.

The major Christian Arab communities in the U.S. are described below.

ORTHODOX CHURCHES

Antiochian Orthodox Christian Archdiocese of North America

The U.S. and Canadian branch of the Antiochian Orthodox church, known as the Antiochian Orthodox Christian Archdiocese of North America, came into being in 1975, when two groups that had split apart in 1936 were reunited. The parent church's Holy Synod is based in Syria; the North American headquarters are in Englewood, N.J. The size of the church's U.S. constituency is somewhat of a mystery. Spokesmen claim 50,000 "dues-paying members" but add that a total of 350,000 persons is "attached to" or "associated with" the Archdiocese. The 1978 Yearbook of American and Canadian Churches reports a membership of 152,000, with 152 ordained clergy and 110 churches. The American Arabic-Speaking Community Almanac of 1975 lists 98 churches, broadly distributed throughout the U.S., but most numerous in California, Florida, Massachusetts, Michigan, New York, Ohio and Pennsylvania.

The Antiochian church has influence beyond its numbers because it is a member of the National Council of Churches with representation on the NCC's Governing Board. Its representative there is Dr. Frank Maria, chairman

of Lebanese refugees. All these points, widely publicized, were repeated as the Patriarch traveled from coast to coast, attending six regional parish conferences and visiting New York, Boston, Montreal, Pittsburgh, Detroit, Louisville, Oklahoma City and Los Angeles. In Louisville he said war in the Middle East was inevitable unless Israel gave back the territories taken in 1967.

Coptic Orthodox Church

Adherents believe the Coptic Orthodox church to be Christianity's oldest organized denomination and to have been founded by St. Mark in 40 C.E. in Alexandria. Today, about 7 million of Egypt's 40 million inhabitants are Copts. The head of the church is Pope Shenouda III in Cairo. In the U.S., according to the 1978 Yearbook of American and Canadian Churches, the inclusive U.S. membership totals 40,000, with 14 churches and 12 ordained clergy.

In April and May 1977, Pope Shenouda paid a ceremonial visit to the U.S. and Canada, traveling to Toronto, Ottawa, Montreal, Buffalo, Detroit, Cleveland, Chicago, San Francisco, Los Angeles and Houston, as well as to Washington and New York. In Washington he met with President Carter and visited by the local Catholic archbishop, William Cardinal Baum. In New York, accompanied by two Egyptian ambassadors, he saw UN Secretary General Waldheim.

Pope Shenouda is a former Egyptian Army officer. He took part in the Israel-Arab War of 1947, and during the War of 1973 was reported by Radio Cairo to have asked that he be drafted again. However, no anti-Israel remarks by him or others were noted during his North American tour, nor has the American Coptic community been particularly active against Israel.

Syrian Orthodox Church of Antioch (Archdiocese of the U.S.A. and Canada)

The Syrian Orthodox Church of Antioch traces its origin to the earliest Patriarchate established in Antioch by St. Peter the Apostle, and is under the supreme ecclesiastical jurisdiction of the Syrian Orthodox Patriarch of Antioch and All the East. No information about its worldwide or U.S. membership is available. In the Middle East and India, it has 35 archdioceses as well as many churches, schools and seminaries. In the U.S. there are eight parishes, in California, Illinois, Massachusetts, Michigan, New Jersey and Rhode Island. In Canada, there are three, two of them in the Province of Quebec and one in Ontario.

The present head of the Church is Patriarch Mar Ignatius Yacoub III. He has visited the U.S. twice, in 1969 and 1971. The Archdiocese of the U.S.A. and Canada was formally created in 1957. Its head is Archbishop Athanasius Yeshue Samuel, previously Syrian Orthodox Metropolitan in Jerusalem, who first came to the U.S. in 1949 to collect war relief funds for his co-religionists. His headquarters are in Hackensack, N.J. The Syrian Orthodox Church of Antioch is a constituent body of the National Council of Churches, and Archbishop Samuel serves on the NCC Governing Board.

In the U.S., Melkites number about 20,000. An eparchy (diocese) was established by papal bull in 1977, in Newton, Massachusetts. The eparch or head of the American church, Archbishop Joseph Tawil, was one of and Eastern Rite Catholic and Orthodox Group which hailed the UN's recognition of the PLO, describing the latter as "a moderate organization whose concern had been the liberation of their homeland from Israeli occupation and aggression."

In July 1976, Patriarch Maximos visited this country to attend the annual meeting of the American branch of his church, as well as the International Eucharistic Congress in Philadelphia. At a press conference he urged the U.S. to be "more impartial, not involved one hundred percent with Israel," and added that he thought the U.S. was beginning to give "more consideration to the Arab side" in the Middle East. He asked that the U.S. use its influence to have the lands occupied by Israel since 1967 returned to Arab control, so that the Palestinians might create their own state on the West Bank.

In June 1977, on the tenth anniversary of the Seven-Day War, Patriarch Maximos celebrated a special mass in Rome to pray for Jerusalem. The ceremony was organized by the Egyptian Ambassador to the Holy See, who is the dean of Arab diplomats accredited to the Vatican; it was attended by a number of high Vatican officials. The patriarch called on the Jewish people to recognize the rights of the Palestinians, and told those present: "Let us pray for the return of the Palestinians to their homeland."

A curious conflict arose between Patriarch Maximos and the Vatican over the Patriarch's authority to ordain priests serving in the U.S. Unlike the Roman Catholic Church, the Melkite Church accepts married men into the priesthood. Two married priests ordained in the Middle East are serving in the Newton eparchy; a third was ordained in Canada and then was brought to the U.S. A Vatican spokesman claimed that the Canadian ordination was illicit, and that those performed in the Middle East were licit only for service in that area, not in the U.S. Maximos replied sharply, asserting his own prerogative and taking the Vatican spokesman to task.

The controversy over patriarchal vs. papal authority, while an internal Christian affair, has a bearing on the matter of Arab influence in American Christian institutions and thus is of concern to Jews. An influx of Arab clergy ordained by an Arab prelate with a record of strong hostility to Israel is not a heartening prospect. Significantly, the priest ordained in Canada, the Reverend Romanos Russo, is the director of the Damascus area group for the Friends of the Holy Land, a nonprofit organization headquartered in Yonkers, New York, which was founded in 1974 "under the guidance of His Beatitude, Maximos V Hakim..." Whether or not Patriarch Maximos will use the Newton eparchy to bring Arab prelates into the U.S., and what roles such prelates may play here, will bear careful watching.

The Maronite Diocese

The Maronites take their name from St. Maron, a monk who lived in Northern Syria in the late fourth century. Their liturgy is in Aramaic.

ORGANIZATIONAL TIES

To what degree do the various Arab Christian groups in the U.S. make common cause with one another, with Moslem leaders and with non-Arab Christian groups in promoting anti-Israel positions? The answer is that some are extremely active in this way, others not at all; the Arab-American community, far from being monolithic, reflects many of the differences and power struggles that divide peoples and governments in the Middle East.

Many Maronites, for example, are friendly to Israel, because Israeli forces have acted to protect and preserve their co-religionists during the recent fighting in Lebanon; others are anti-Israel, believing that Israel's policies -- indeed, her very existence -- are ultimately responsible for the influx of Palestinians which upset the delicate political and religious balance in Lebanon and helped precipitate the civil war there.

Yet despite differences like these, there are efforts to foster a growing pan-Arab consciousness. Sparked by the more vehemently anti-Israel spokesmen, a number of religious leaders have formed a Standing Conference of American Middle Eastern Christian and Moslem Leaders. The Antiochian Orthodox Metropolitan Philip Saliba is its Secretary General; the Melkite Archbishop, Joseph Tawil, is treasurer. Maronite Bishop Francis Zayek is also a member, as are Imam Mohamad Jawad Chirri, Islamic Center in Detroit; Imam Muhammed Abdul Rauf of the Islamic Center, Washington; the Rev. George Garmo of the Chaldean Catholic Church in Southfield, Mich.; the Rev. Joseph Hourani of the Presbyterian Church in Elmer, N.J.; Msgr. John Nolan of the Catholic Near East Welfare Association in New York; Rafic Rasamny of the American Druze Society in New York; also, Bishop Mar Aprim Khamis of the Church of the East in Chicago; Archbishop Mar Athanasius Y. Samuel of the Syrian Orthodox Church of Antioch in Hackensack, N.J.; and Bishop Mesrob Ashjian of the Armenian Apostolic Church of America in New York.

The Standing Conference claims to represent two million Americans of Arabic heritage and to be "composed of hierarchs and representatives of Orthodox Christian, Roman Catholic, Protestant, Sunnite Moslem, Shiite Moslem and Druze bodies in the United States." On March 22, 1978, Metropolitan Saliba, acting for the Standing Conference, wired to President Carter and Secretary of State Vance to protest the Israeli invasion and occupation of South Lebanon. In a press release of the Conference, issued on the letterhead of the Antiochian archdiocese, he commented: "Without Israeli withdrawal from all Arab-occupied land and self-determination for the Palestinian people, there will never be peace in the land of the Prince of Peace."

In the Washington area, Arab-American Moslem and Christian leaders came together in October 1977 to assure President Carter of their support for his human rights program. They particularly commended the 1977 U.S.-Soviet declaration concerning objectives for an Arab-Israeli peace settlement (a move since eclipsed by President Sadat's visit to Israel and the Camp David accords), and stressed that the legitimacy of Palestinian rights must be taken into account in any settlement. The signers were: the Very Reverend George M. Rados, pastor of St. George Antiochian Orthodox Church; the Reverend Joseph Francavilla, pastor of Holy Transfiguration Melkite Greek Catholic Church; Dr.

for ten years Director of Communications at the Reformed Church in America, protested what he described as "a persistent anti-Israel propaganda campaign within the Council," noted that "every NCC Governing Board meeting has been preceded by internal bureaucratic power plays aimed at criticizing Israel," and claimed that whenever "concerns were raised in the Council about anti-Semitism, the Holocaust or the emergence of neo-Nazi movements, attempts have been made to trivialize or neutralize them." Earlier, Mr. Rottenberg had been among those who protested that Rumanian Archbishop Valerian Trifa, who was under Federal indictment on charges of having lied about his involvement in war crimes, was a member of the NCC Governing Board. Shortly after the publication of his letter in the Times, Rottenberg was fired from his denominational position.

There are, both within the NCC and in denominational groups, persons sympathetic to Israel and seriously interested in Jewish-Christian dialogue, but they are less close to the centers of institutional power and funding than those of the opposite persuasion:

Where churches have had an overseas missionary relationship with a particular faith, funds can be obtained from the mission agencies. However, where no such relationship exists, it is very difficult to attract financial support. The Jewish-Christian Advisory Committee of the National Council of Churches is an illustration. Because there are no parallel units with funding capability in the denominations, this office is facing a serious financial crisis. Our churches are not presently equipped to deal with other faiths outside the context of mission.⁵

A recent resolution by the NCC Governing Board on the Middle East peace effort, adopted on November 3, 1978, combined elements of sympathy and antipathy toward Israel. It welcomed the movement toward peace represented by the Camp David agreements, celebrated the role of Egypt and the initiatives of its President, and rejoiced with Israel "in feeling that its dream of peace and deliverance might be realized and the threat of annihilation diminished." At the same time, the resolution underscored the Palestinians' right to self-determination, reaffirmed "the principle of the inadmissibility of the acquisition of territory by force," and urged President Carter "to broaden the context of the peace discussions to include the recognized representatives of the Palestinian people in order to enable them to become full parties in the peace process." The resolution also voiced the hope that other Arab states besides Egypt would agree to participate in the search for peace and cautioned that until the unresolved issues in the Middle East conflict were settled, "the unity, independence, and territorial integrity of Lebanon" would "continue to be in jeopardy."

Other Organizations

Members of the clergy and present or former church officials also sit on the boards of a number of pro-Arab organizations that are not explicitly

5. Robert L. Turnipseed: "Interreligious Relationship -- An Urgent Ecumenical Concern," editorial in Ecumenical Trends, September 1978

CONCLUSION

Recent public opinion polls have shown some dilution of American popular support for Israel: not a reversal toward increased identification with the Arab cause, but a shift toward neutrality.

After thirty years of incessant refusal by the Arab states to recognize Israel, Egyptian President Sadat's dramatic visit to Jerusalem undoubtedly captured the imagination of many Americans and prompted them to view him as the prime champion of peace. On the other hand, Israel's concerns for security and normalization as part of the peace process may have impressed many Americans as foot-dragging or nit-picking. The shift in public opinion is probably due more to these developments than to the efforts of the anti-Israel groups described in this report. Undoubtedly, most Americans welcomed the signing of a peace treaty between Israel and Egypt, but how that achievement will affect attitudes toward Israel remains to be seen.

Despite the peace treaty, anti-Israel forces will continue their efforts to attenuate the still broad support Israel enjoys among Americans. The Jewish community, in its interreligious contacts and programs, must help consolidate that support and give it expression, so that voices in the Christian community that are hostile to Israel will not resonate beyond their true proportions.

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