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The Palestinian "Kairos" Document: A Behind-the-Scenes Analysis

Malcolm Lowe*

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The document, as we shall see, is meant to mobilize churches worldwide in a program of boycotts, divestment and delegitimization directed at the State of Israel. It alludes explicitly to a similarly named document issued in South Africa years ago, thus deliberately comparing Israel with the regime of apartheid. It employs extreme language, such as declaring that "the military occupation of our land is a sin against God and humanity." Before surveying the content of the document, however, its credentials should be examined. It has been promoted on its website and by the WCC secretariat as a statement of "Palestinian Christian leaders" that has the "endorsement" of the Heads of Churches in Jerusalem. The reality is different.

The Credentials

With the exception of Arab Lutheran Bishop Munib Younan, the Heads of Churches played no role in the origins of this document. Some of them were taken by surprise when it appeared. They were, however, put under political pressure to toe the line propounded by the document. Four days later, consequently, they issued a brief statement of their own. It is worth quoting in full:

"We, the Patriarchs and Heads of Churches in Jerusalem, hear the cry of hope that our children have launched in these difficult times that we still experience in this Holy Land. We support them and stand by them in their faith, their hope, their love and their vision for the future. We also support the call to all our faithful as well as to the Israeli and Palestinian Leaders, to the International Community and to the World Churches, in order to accelerate the achievement of justice, peace and reconciliation in this Holy Land. We ask God to bless all our children by giving them more power in order to contribute effectively in establishing and developing their community, while making it a community of love, trust, justice and peace."

Evidently, this is anything but an endorsement of worldwide campaigns against the State of

Israel. No alleged "sin" is denounced and indeed no blame is cast upon anyone. On the contrary, the statement contains nothing that would offend people of goodwill anywhere. It calls, on the one hand, for political and religious leaders to increase their commitments to achieving peace. On the other, it urges Palestinian Christians to focus on building up the local Christian community. Indeed, the statement can be read as a mild rebuke to the authors of the document: Palestinian Christians should put their main effort into strengthening their own community rather than engaging in worldwide political agitation.

Nevertheless, the protagonists of "Kairos Palestine" decided to exploit that statement for their own purposes. On the website, the statement and their document are combined into a single PDF file in which the statement of the Heads of Churches is placed at the beginning, as if it were a prior endorsement of their own views in the document. The unwary reader does not realize that the statement is no endorsement, but rather a wary reaction that seeks to divert the energies of the faithful into constructive activity within the community rather than wasting them on vain political posturing.

So the document represents the views not of the Heads of churches but of its own authors. Let us now examine their claim to be "Palestinian Christian leaders." Here it must be emphasized that the website kairospalestine has changed the claimed authorship of the document. Originally, the document appeared on the website with the following list of authors:

- His Beatitude Patriarch Michel Sabbah
- His Eminence Archbishop Atallah Hanna
- Bishop Munib Younan
- Rev. Dr. Jamal Khader
- Rev. Dr. Rafiq Khoury
- Rev. Dr. Mitri Raheb
- Rev. Dr. Naim Ateek
- Rev. Dr. Yohana Katanacho
- Rev. Fadi Diab
- Dr. Jiries Khoury
- Ms. Cedar Duaybis
- Ms. Nora Kort
- Ms. Lucy Thaljieh
- Mr. Nidal Abu El Zuluf
- Mr. Yusef Daher
- Mr. Rifat Kassis - Coordinator

In the meantime, however, the name of Bishop Younan has disappeared from the list. This is significant because he was the only currently serving Head of Church to appear among the authors. That is, Younan is the only signatory who could truthfully claim to be a "Palestinian Christian leader." Sabbah, although the document does not trouble to tell you, retired as Latin Patriarch early in 2008, so he spoke only for himself and not for the Latin Patriarchate. The case of Greek Orthodox Archbishop Atallah Hanna is even more acute. Online one can find that back in 2007 he publicly called for withdrawal of the official recognition of Greek Patriarch Theophilos III. As a consequence, his salary from the Greek Patriarchate was suspended for several months, the account says. Far from being a leader, he is rather an opponent of the Christian leadership.

The other signatories are parish priests, low level officials and laypeople. For sure, some of them are fairly well known as long-term agitators on behalf of Palestinian political aims and echoes of their familiar views are easily discerned in the document. A recent recruit is Yusuf Daher, whom the WCC secretariat has set up with an office in Jerusalem in order to mobilize

Christians on behalf of the Palestinians. So the document, as it now appears on kairospalestine, does not have any bona fide Christian leader among its authors.

Why did Younan's name disappear? Simply because he asked to have it removed, so as not to be compromised by it. Younan is as energetic a promoter of Palestinian political aims as any of the others, but he also likes to hobnob with Jewish religious figures and Israeli officials. He does not want to endanger these relationships. Reportedly, he now assures anyone who asks that he does not agree with everything in the document and that he is committed only to the statement of the Heads of Churches, where his name occurs near the bottom of the list. Thus, from being an author of the document, Younan has turned into a witness contradicting the claim that the Heads of Churches endorsed it.

The Content

The document is divided into numbered sections and subsections. There is no need, however, to go into all those details here, since in each main section the basic intent can be identified, usually in one or more key sentences. In the first section, "The Reality on the Ground," the crucial words are (1.4):

"Yes, there is Palestinian resistance to the occupation. However, if there were no occupation, there would be no resistance, no fear and no insecurity. This is our understanding of the situation. Therefore, we call on the Israelis to end the occupation. Then they will see a new world in which there is no fear, no threat but rather security, justice and peace."

This echoes the line propagated by Michel Sabbah for years: end the occupation and Palestinian terrorism, euphemistically termed "resistance," will cease for ever. The authors know that this is a lie. They know that organizations such as Hamas, which command mass support among the Palestinian population, are sworn to continue that "resistance" as long as the State of Israel exists.

The same false message is repeated later in the document (4.3); note how "terrorism" is placed in inverted commas, that is, when it is named as such at all:

"We call on Israel to give up its injustice towards us, not to twist the truth of reality of the occupation by pretending that it is a battle against terrorism. The roots of 'terrorism' are in the human injustice committed and in the evil of the occupation. These must be removed if there be a sincere intention to remove 'terrorism'."

Yet most of the document echoes not Sabbah but Naim Ateek and his familiar insistence on "justice and only justice," meaning the unconditional fulfilment of Palestinian demands. This appears already in the second section, entitled "A Word of Faith" and subtitled "We believe in one God, a good and just God." The section has two thrusts. One is to denounce "Biblical fundamentalism," that is, to delegitimize any kind of sympathy for Israel among Christians (e.g., 2.2.2 and 2.3.3). The other is expressed in the words (2.5):

"We also declare that the Israeli occupation of Palestinian land is a sin against God and humanity because it deprives the Palestinians of their basic human rights, bestowed by God. It distorts the image of God in the Israeli who has become an occupier just as it distorts this image in the Palestinian living under occupation. We declare that any theology, seemingly based on the Bible or on faith or on history, that legitimizes the occupation, is far from Christian teachings, because it calls for violence and holy war in the name of God Almighty, subordinating God to temporary human interests, and distorting the divine image in the human beings living under both political and theological injustice."

The authors know, of course, that most Israelis do not subscribe to such a theology, but that the political theology of Hamas indeed "calls for violence and holy war in the name of God Almighty" (or at any rate in the name of Allah). But the deception goes beyond this. Ateek's organization Sabeel promotes worldwide the view that the "two-state solution" is not viable, that "justice" will be achieved only when the State of Israel disappears into a single binational state with an Arab majority. This message, as we shall see shortly, is also present implicitly in a document that superficially purports to respect legitimate aspirations for Jews and Arabs alike.

The third and fourth sections are entitled "Hope" and "Love." The former details where the authors think they can mobilize support for their aims from churches, the international community, Israelis and Jews. The latter is about how to combat Israel, whether by so-called "resistance" or by calling "on individuals, companies and states to engage in divestment and in an economic and commercial boycott of everything produced by the occupation."

The trio of "Faith, Hope and Love" is a deliberate echo of a famous passage of Paul (1 Corinthians 13). The degradation of Paul's conception for Palestinian political purposes is reminiscent of George Orwell's 1984, in which the Ministry of Peace conducts permanent war, the Ministry of Love operates a police state and the Ministry of Truth deals in propaganda.

The remaining sections are directed at various named audiences. A "Word to Our Brothers and Sisters" (chiefly Palestinian Christians, section 5) is followed by their "Word to the Churches of the World" (section 6). Here they issue a "message of solidarity" with their Christian supporters and a "call to repentance" directed against "fundamentalist theological positions." In other words, good Christians are those who support Palestinian political aims unconditionally, bad Christians are any who sympathize with Israel.

Next (section 7) comes a "Word to the International Community." It is a call for "the beginning of a system of economic sanctions and boycott to be applied against Israel." Note that it is no longer to be merely a "boycott of everything produced by the occupation" (as in section 2) but a boycott of Israel as such.

After an address to "Jewish and Muslim Religious Leaders" (section 8) comes a "Call to our Palestinian People and to the Israelis" (section 9). Here they "appeal to the international community to lend its support towards this union and to respect the will of the Palestinian people as expressed freely" (9.4), that is, the international community should drop its well-known three conditions for any dealings with the elected Hamas government. Even more revealing is the following (9.3):

"Trying to make the state a religious state, Jewish or Islamic, suffocates the state, confines it within narrow limits, and transforms it into a state that practices discrimination and exclusion, preferring one citizen over another. We appeal to both religious Jews and Muslims: let the state be a state for all its citizens, with a vision constructed on respect for religion but also equality, justice, liberty and respect for pluralism and not on domination by a religion or a numerical majority."

A naïve reader will not notice here what a more attentive reading reveals: the authors want to see a single state embracing Muslims, Jews and Christians alike. Indeed, nowhere in the document does the term "two states" occur. Likewise, the term "occupation" is freely used, but without a clear statement of what areas are considered to be "occupied." Thus the document delivers different messages to different audiences. Well-intentioned but unwary sympathizers can imagine that the authors subscribe to "two states for two peoples," but insiders can be sure that the ultimate aim is the old one of a unitary Palestine. The concluding sentences of the document (section 10) permit the same double interpretation:

"In the absence of all hope, we cry out our cry of hope. We believe in God, good and just. We believe that God's goodness will finally triumph over the evil of hate and of death that still persist in our land. We will see here 'a new land' and 'a new human being', capable of rising up in the spirit to love each one of his or her brothers and sisters."

Note also how the document alludes to the issue of the refugees of 1948 and their millions of descendants (1.1.6):

"Refugees are also part of our reality. Most of them are still living in camps under difficult circumstances. They have been waiting for their right of return, generation after generation. What will be their fate?"

The question at the end of the paragraph is another device to avoid alienating potential sympathizers. Take it away and the intention of the authors is plain: those millions have to wait on in their camps until they can pour into Israel in a mass and create an Arab majority there.

The Aims

Whatever their ultimate aspiration, the immediate aims of the authors are two:

- To bring about a total Israeli withdrawal to the pre-1967 lines by means of economic sanctions.
- To neutralize the support of Christian Zionists and any other Christians for Israel.

These aims are closely related. The governments of the world basically agree with the claim of the document that half a million Jews are living illegally in Palestinian territory, including half the Jewish population of Jerusalem. If those governments are not yet pressing for a total withdrawal, it is merely on pragmatic grounds: an equal exchange of territory seems a less disruptive and much less expensive solution than uprooting that whole population. It is only certain Christian groups that justify the Jewish presence in those areas on an ideological basis and not merely out of political convenience.

Moreover, especially in the US, but not only there, those Christians have been able to influence both public opinion and political decision makers. Suppose them suddenly removed and you can imagine the force of a unanimous wall of hostility toward Israel.

The present Israeli prime minister knows this as well as anyone. We heard him address a meeting in the Knesset where he displayed a detailed awareness of how the State of Israel emerged from alliances of Christians and Jews during the last two centuries. It is all the more unfortunate, consequently, that there are others in positions of power in Israel whose actions seemed designed to alienate Israel's only historic allies.

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