

4-1-2012

Una McGahern. Palestinian Christians in Israel: State attitudes towards non-Muslims in a Jewish state. London & New York: Routledge. 2011.

Sarah Cardaun Ph.D.
King's College, London, Sarah.cardaun@kcl.ac.uk

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.lindenwood.edu/jigs>



Part of the [Anthropology Commons](#), [Critical and Cultural Studies Commons](#), [Environmental Studies Commons](#), and the [Sociology Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Cardaun, Sarah Ph.D. (2012) "Una McGahern. Palestinian Christians in Israel: State attitudes towards non-Muslims in a Jewish state. London & New York: Routledge. 2011.," *Journal of International and Global Studies*: Vol. 3: No. 2, Article 20.

DOI: 10.62608/2158-0669.1105

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.lindenwood.edu/jigs/vol3/iss2/20>

This Book Review is brought to you for free and open access by the Journals at Digital Commons@Lindenwood University. It has been accepted for inclusion in Journal of International and Global Studies by an authorized editor of Digital Commons@Lindenwood University. For more information, please contact phuffman@lindenwood.edu.

Una McGahern. *Palestinian Christians in Israel: State attitudes towards non-Muslims in a Jewish state*. London & New York: Routledge. 2011.

In the context of the incessant political and scholarly debates about the “Palestinian Problem,” it is usually the plight of Palestinian refugees and the situation of the Palestinians in the occupied territories that receive the greatest share of attention. Comparatively, fewer studies have looked at the Palestinians living in Israel proper (Israeli Arabs), which prompted the well-known Israeli scholar Ilan Pappé to entitle his recent book about the history of Palestinians in Israel “The Forgotten Palestinians” (Yale University Press, 2011). Moreover, many of those that deal with the Arab minority in Israel base their analyses on the assumption that the common Palestinian identity transcends all internal cultural or religious differences. There is good reason to support this belief, but as a result, different segments within the Palestinian community in Israel, such as the Palestinian Christians, have been neglected as a distinct object of research.

By contrast, *Palestinian Christians in Israel*, by Una McGahern, which is based on the author’s doctoral dissertation and was published under the aegis of the Durham Modern Middle East and Islamic World Series, focuses specifically on the Palestinian Christian community in Israel and thereby contributes to filling this gap in research. The uninitiated reader is introduced to the general religious, social, political and economic characteristics of the Christian communities in Israel in one of the initial chapters, which provides some useful statistics based on sources such as Israel’s Central Bureau of Statistics (CBS); however, the aim of this study is more than a mere description of different Christian denominations in Israel, which is so typical of many “Holy Land Studies.” The book instead sets out to examine a current issue from a highly critical perspective by looking at present-day state-minority relations in Israel, more specifically the question of how the Jewish state deals with its Palestinian Christian citizens.

A state’s treatment of its minorities is an important indicator of the strength of democracy in a political system. The depth of commitment of the Israeli state to democracy has just recently been questioned anew over several pieces of legislation which some see as contradicting important democratic principles such as freedom of speech. This current but by no means new debate about the state of democracy in Israel makes some of the questions raised in this book even more topical.

McGahern attends to the theoretical dimension of her topic at the outset of the study, discussing a wide variety of important scholarly works that have dealt with the nature of Israeli society, the Israeli state, and Israel’s minority policies. On the basis of this theoretical literature review, Israel can be described as a multi-ethnic, plural, and deeply divided society. Concerning the Israeli state, while acknowledging the existence of genuinely democratic features, she agrees with critical scholars such as Oren Yiftachel in arguing that Israel is actually not a democracy but rather an “ethnocracy.”

The tension created by the state’s commitment to democracy and equality on the one hand and the desire to maintain the specific ethnic character of the only Jewish state in the world become manifest in Israel’s treatment of the Palestinian minority. While the relationship between the Jewish state and the Israeli Arabs is often exclusively looked at through the “Muslim-Jewish” prism and is, moreover, characterized by many as purely discriminatory, a review of existing literature about Palestinian Christians in chapter four suggests that the state’s treatment of the Palestinian Christians might perhaps be slightly more complex. Several factors, such as the Palestinian Christians’ Arab ethnicity as well as their political activism support the claim that Israel simply perceives them as part of the wider “Arab problem.” At the same time, other factors including the image of Christians as “non-Muslims”—and members of a modern, Westernized, and secular community—and their

international significance and strategically important regional links might contribute to a somewhat more preferential treatment of Christians compared to other segments of the Palestinian community.

The rest of the book is devoted to a further examination of this thesis, starting with the presentation of the main results of 36 semi-structured expert interviews. McGahern conducted interviews with academics, church leaders, politicians, and NGO representatives, among them some high-profile figures such as Ramiz Jaraisy, Mayor of Nazareth since 1994, and the Greek Orthodox Patriarch of Jerusalem, Theofilos III. Some of the previously identified factors that can potentially influence state attitudes towards Palestinian Christians are reiterated by the respondents. On the other hand, the wide variety of viewpoints reflected in the answers also raises the question how much can be generalized from these expert interviews beyond individual interpretations.

What the expert interviews did help to identify and shed more light on were two very insightful cases illustrating Israel's treatment of Palestinian Christians. These two case studies analyzed in chapters six and seven look at role of the state in two different types of intra-communal conflicts and make up one of the most interesting parts of the entire book. The government's involvement in the conflict between the Islamic movement and the municipality in Nazareth in the lead-up to the planned 2000 millennium celebrations revealed, according to McGahern, a "highly opportunistic and indifferent" (p. 149) attitude towards the Palestinian Arabs and the Christians in particular. The plans of the Christian-led municipality to harness the enormous potential that the the turn of the millennium provided for tourism would have benefitted the economic development of the whole city, but the way successive Israeli governments temporarily sided with the Islamic movement and prolonged administrative processes led to the ultimate failure of these plans. Electoral politics, anti-Christian feelings, as well as the general suspicion aroused by Christian involvement in Arab nationalist politics all contributed to a "particular form of discrimination against Palestinian Christians in Israel which, in turn, increases the level of isolation and neglect experienced by them" (p. 149).

An even more direct form of discrimination occurs through the exemption of Muslim and Christian Palestinians from conscription to the Israel Defense Forces (IDF)—not always a welcome relief but often seen as a form of exclusion from one of the most important, nation-building institutions in Israel.. In contrast, the Druze are not exempt from military service in Israel and thus enjoy the numerous social, economic, and career benefits associated with it—which Palestinian Christians are deprived of. According to McGahern, the intra-communal tensions created by this social inequality are further exacerbated by the fact that—unlike the Christians—the Druze have access to military equipment and weapons which they have used in a number of different conflicts and violent clashes¹ with Christians in recent years. The seemingly indifferent or even partisan reaction of regional Israeli police and other authorities during and after these incidences gave rise to feelings among the Palestinian Christian community of being abandoned and treated unfairly.

Overall, the study concludes that "the notion of state preferentialism which is often encountered within the literature and the media to describe the relationship between the Jewish state and its Palestinian Christian minority is, at best, flawed and, at worst, misleading" (p. 177).

Successfully avoiding oversimplifications, McGahern paints a picture of a complex relationship between Israel and the Palestinian Christians, which often seems to be characterized by indifference and political opportunism.

On a more critical note, although the book considers Palestinian Christians' involvement in political parties and movements, overall, *Palestinian Christians in Israel*

¹ Four village conflicts took place between the Druze and the Christians: Kfar Yasif 1981, Rameh 2003, Abu Snan 2005, Mugar 2005 and one city conflict: Shfar'amr 2009.

presents this minority as a small, relatively insignificant community that is subjected to the state's wilful policies. Depending on one's general viewpoint and bearing in mind that recent scholarship on Christians in the Middle East has emphasized the need to avoid looking at such minorities as merely passive subjects but to also consider them as active actors, it could therefore be argued that by concentrating primarily on what is being done to the Palestinian Christians by the Israeli state, the study slightly neglects their agency.

Also, a few minor editing errors have been overlooked (e.g. pp. 12; 137; 178), but this is negligible and does not diminish the overall impression that this study is the product of thorough and diligent research. A lot of thought and effort has clearly gone into conducting this study, which deals with a relevant and interesting topic, and the result is an important contribution to the academic debate about the relation between the Israeli state and its Palestinian minority.

Sarah Cardaun, Ph.D.
King's College, London
Sarah.cardaun@kcl.ac.uk