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Palestinian Christians despair as Gaza homeland destroyed by Israeli's war

As Trump prepares to return as president of Israel's most powerful ally, Khalil Sayegh recalls his childhood in Gaza's Christian community which has been ravaged for years of Israeli bombardment.

By Hadas Gold, Eugenia Marera, Lucas Foxx and Mohammed Tawfeeq, CNN Updated 1:00 PM EST, Fri November 15, 2024

Khalil Sayegh, a Gaza native who now lives in the US, stands in the Church of the Holy Family in Bethlehem, Palestinian Territories, on November 8, 2024. Sayegh's family fled their home in Gaza City during the war. (Mahmoud Illean/AP)

By Hadas Gold
Staff Writer

When Khalil Sayegh thinks back to his childhood at the Gaza Strip, the Greek Orthodox Church of Saint Porphyrius looms large in his memory.

Sayegh, now 29, remembers the rumblings, the Sunday School classes, the music lessons and the rubies in the blue gravesyard.

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Sayegh's family left Gaza in 2006 and moved to the US, first to Florida, then to Texas, where they joined a church that was almost all Palestinian Christians. Their ancestral roots in Gaza go back centuries, he said, and his family's ancestral home was in Gaza City, where they had lived for generations.

Sayegh's homeland, which has been largely left to rubble and ruin, has been ravaged in the past year by the war, which has been largely funded by the US. Hundreds of thousands of Palestinians have been displaced while hospitals and schools have been targeted in Israeli airstrikes.

But Sayegh returns to memories of better times. A member of the Gaza Strip's small but ancient Christian community, he remembers, for example, the Christmas Eve celebrations at St Porphyrius every Sunday – the lights, incense and the bleeding chestnuts, mixed with the smell of the Mediterranean Sea.

The church and surrounding compound, parts of which date back to the 5th century CE, was a hub for Gaza's Christian community.

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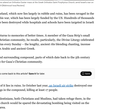
Today, much of it has been razed. Its brittles that year, an Israeli air strike killed seven of the buildings in the compound, killing at least 17 people.

About pre-Palestinians, both Christians and Muslims, had taken refuge there. In the hope that the church would be spared the devastating bombing being visited on the surrounding area.

The church was among a number that had opened their doors to Palestinians fleeing the air strikes, which began on October 7 last year.



Sayegh's family left Gaza in 2006 and moved to the US. (Courtesy Khalil Sayegh)

'My heart was broken'

But the other side of the city, the Catholic Parish of the Holy Family had also welcomed about two of them, among them Sayegh's parents and two of his siblings.

In November, a few months after the bombs had arrived at the church, an IDF sniper killed two female snipers, a mother and daughter, as they walked from one building to another, he said. Apparently in another, Fire was also on the compound's grounds, the other is stable.

Then, on December 14, a few days before Christmas, Sayegh's father, Jerius – Jeanne-Marie's husband – was killed by a sniper shot aimed at the church's gate, which was also the only entrance to the compound.

"There was no medication left in the compound, and ambulance were not allowed to fly the IDF," Sayegh tells Al Jazeera. "If an Yellow had been able to access medical care, he would still be here today."

Several months later, Sayegh would strike again. In April, Sayegh's 18-year-old sister, Lucy, died – apparently from hazelnuts – as she attempted to flee Gaza for the southern Sudan.

Lucy was travelling with her mother to Egypt, where she hoped to find safety and enrol in a university. Her mother, Jeanne-Marie, survived the journey, but Lucy died in a Cairo Israeli airstrike described as the "safe zone", which included a series dilapidated tents. The cause of death was not clear, but Sayegh suspects it was hazelnuts.

The journey proved too much for Lucy, who tragically died on the way.

Sayegh's family left Gaza in 2006 and moved to the US. (Courtesy Khalil Sayegh)

A sniper's rifled Sayegh with the arrow. "My heart was broken," he says. "In that one week, it was impossible to feel any comfort, even from God."

Even those a picture of Khalil sayegh such intense, expected personal tragedies?

Despite, Sayegh notes, is an element that verge in much of the Christian theological tradition, as compassion for the terrible evils of the world. The Psalms lament that "the affliction of the righteous are many" while "the wicked spring up like grass".

Sayegh's family left Gaza in 2006 and moved to the US. (Courtesy Khalil Sayegh)

Sayegh, Khalil for instantiation, he has seen of the Christian faith is the idea that the has triumphed over death, that good has triumphed over evil – and will continue to do so, even when things appear to be at their bleakest.

Sayegh's family left Gaza in 2006 and moved to the US. (Courtesy Khalil Sayegh)

Living a childhood in crisis

Sayegh was born in Gaza, a middle-class Christian parents. He was one of four children, and grew up in Gaza City, in the northern part of the Strip.

Although his family were relatively prosperous, they were no his religious, having had their home in the night explosions by Zionist gangs and the running war that Palestinians refer to as the "Nakba", or "catastrophe".

As well as the weekly Sunday services, and the big feasts like Easter and Christmas, Sayegh's family would also celebrate the Muslim holidays, including Eid al-Fitr, which tolerates Easter and the Young Men's Christian Association (YMCA).

Every Thursday, Sayegh would visit the YMCA, and during the summers he would attend camp there.

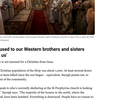
"It was set of the series of young life in Gaza," he recalls. "It's where you would go to meet your friends, play tennis. It's where you would have fun and build your friendships."

Until young, when Sayegh was six, thousands of Israeli soldiers were present in the Strip, protecting their illegal settlements there.

Military checkpoints meant that driving from one part of Gaza to the other could take five or six hours, despite the fact that the Strip is only 40km (25 miles) long. There, he added, soldiers would sometimes harass Palestinians, when workers from the Jewish settlements would come to the camp to buy fruit.

Sayegh's family left Gaza in 2006 and moved to the US. (Courtesy Khalil Sayegh)

"I can't be sarcastic without my parents' permission," Sayegh says now. "I was about, 5 years old, very hard."



Sayegh's family left Gaza in 2006 and moved to the US. (Courtesy Khalil Sayegh)

These were frequent Israeli air-strikes too, and gunfights, particularly during the five years of the Second Intifada from onwards to today.

In camp, Israeli forces withdrew entirely from Gaza, leaving the Israeli settlers with their homes, which were then ransacked by Palestinian gangs/mobs, which left some prisoners, clearly had control of the Strip, some to power.

The sectarian of Hamas was a worry for the Christian community, says Sayegh, but in the end Gaza was a national. Hamas threw in with politicians in the Christian community, and Christian politicians, and Christian businessmen, and Christian people, who were proto-Hamas's image in the West – but it also made a real difference, as the group thwarted various fundamentalist attacks on local Christians.

That is not to say there were no problems. Sayegh notes that there was a "gradual increase in pressure" on the Christian community, which was "not to be underestimated" but, he said, it pale, for Gaza's Christians at worse, to what Muslims, "or you,

In late ninth Israeli launched a six-day war, and Israel and an occupation which killed some 1,000 Palestinians, leveled thousands and destroyed almost all arable lands, leaving some 100,000 people homeless.

It was following that disaster, that Sayegh, aged just 14, decided to flee Gaza for the comparative safety of the Strait. He had obtained a work-long period to attend a Christian school in Ramallah, in the West Bank, and was soon joined by his parents, the pressure in the West Bank then becoming, to the core of the Israel government, too great to bear.

"I left by second, without my parents' permission," Sayegh says now. "I was about, 5 years old, very hard."

Sayegh's family left Gaza in 2006 and moved to the US. (Courtesy Khalil Sayegh)

'We are used to our Western brothers and sisters ignoring us'

Sayegh's story is not unusual for a Palestine from Gaza.

The pre-war Christian population of the Strip was about, a ten, by most accounts about Christians have been killed since the war began – equivalent. Sayegh points out, to about 1 percent of the community.

"Everyone I speak to who currently displacing at the St Porphyrius church is holding a family member who was killed in the war," he says. Sayegh's family, like most Christians Palestine, have been wounded. Everything is destroyed. Sayegh hope no reason to [illegible].

Despite this, many Western Christians – particularly US evangelicals – remain conservatively defendant of Israel. We're used to our brothers and sisters in the West simply ignoring us," he says, with a sigh.

A notable exception is Bob Sayegh, no relative of Khalil, who has been arguing for a ceasefire since the earliest days of the war, and calls Gaza's Catholic parish or city, he is hear about the situation there.

"I continue to receive very grave and painful news from Gaza," Francis said at a weekly Sunday to said December last year.

"Unarmed civilians are the objects of bombings and shootings. And this happened even yesterday, in the Holy Family parish in Gaza, where there are no terrorists, but holiday civilians, people who are sick or disabled, some."

Sayegh's family left Gaza in 2006 and moved to the US. (Courtesy Khalil Sayegh)

'We are used to our Western brothers and sisters ignoring us'

Given the situation, says Sayegh, the survival of Gaza's ancient Christian community "just seems like an impossibility".

For Sayegh, a way to cope has been advocacy for the Palestinian cause. He volunteers the CIA, meeting with community groups, churches and speaking to the media.

A few years ago, Sayegh founded the Agape Initiative, a nonprofit organisation which advocates for peace between Israelis and Palestinians. He did so together with an Israeli friend, Eitan Weiss, a IDF veteran of Gaza.

The organisation is short activities has been mostly positive, Sayegh says. Many Americans, he says, have been "very receptive" to the idea that Israelis and Palestinians are people, a fact that Sayegh can only hope to grow the importance of peaceful co-existence and Palestinian rights.

"They appreciate that we do it together," Sayegh adds, "as an Israeli and a Palestinian."

Recent events, however, have forced the pair to rethink their operations. "What the current war has made clear," Sayegh says, "is that you can't talk about power and corporate power and the rights of Palestinians without first delivering justice. That means ending the occupation."

Sayegh's family left Gaza in 2006 and moved to the US. (Courtesy Khalil Sayegh)

Sayegh and Weiss are now putting their energy into promoting the Arab Peace Initiative, which was proposed by Saudi Arabia in 2002 and offers Israel full recognition by Arab states with respect to terms for its full withdrawal from Gaza, the West Bank and the Golan Heights, all recognized as being illegally occupied under international law.

"It's unjustifiable to have to wait enough," Sayegh stresses. "That's putting your good very low. The Palestinian struggle is not about a ceasefire – we're struggling for liberation. We're struggling for the implementation of the Arab Peace Initiative, the implementation of the United Nations resolutions."

For now, however, this also remains a distant ceasi.

At the Church of the Holy Family, pre-war Palestinians, including Sayegh's family, were able to celebrate Christmas and Easter. They held their services in the church and the church has continued to celebrate Christmas.

The YMCA where Sayegh spent much of his childhood, meanwhile, has become a liberal academy, with many people now learned under the football pitch the war played on.

"The suffering just goes on and on," Sayegh says. "Right now, there is no end in sight."

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