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TAYBEH'S PLEA FOR THE LAST CHRISTIANS OF THE HOLY LAND

In 1995, after college and graduate studies, Greek-American Maria C. Khoury, (B.A., Hellenic College, A.L.M., Harvard Univ., Ed.D. Boston Univ.), left Boston for her Palestinian husband's native village of Taybeh on the West Bank, where she has been a constant spokeswoman for non-violence in the Holy Land and an advocate for Palestinian Christians struggling to remain in their ancestral homes. Her international witness has made her one of the most prominent and respected Orthodox Christian voices for a just and peaceful settlement of the Israeli-Arab conflict. As an educator and lecturer, Dr. Khoury is the author of the "Christina" series of Orthodox children's books, proceeds of which go towards raising scholarships and housing opportunities for the Orthodox Christians of Taybeh. Last December, Dr. Khoury was named one of the top four Human Rights Champions of 2009 by the D.C. Human Rights Examiner, along with His Holiness, Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew I.

RTE: Dr. Khoury, we've heard of your work for peace in the Holy Land for a decade and are honored to finally meet you. Can you begin by telling us about your background and what led you to Palestine?

DR. KHOURY: Thank you. I was born in Tripoli, Greece to Greek Orthodox parents. My very first childhood memory is standing in front of the Church of Prophet Elias in Tripoli at midnight, with my father holding the Resurrection candle and telling me, "Christos Anesti!" That memory is now more important to me than ever as I work to keep native Palestinian Christians living in the Holy Land; there must always be Orthodox faithful with indigenous Christian roots to receive the miracle of the holy fire and hear, "Christ is Risen!"

When I was a child my family moved to Denver where, like many Americans, I didn't even know that Christians lived in Palestine; at school and on the news we only heard of Israeli Jews and Palestinian Muslims. In 1979,
Opposite: Taybeh, Palestine.

I went off to Hellenic College in Brookline, MA, which my parents (who were very apprehensive of the American culture) thought would be a good safe place for a Greek girl to maintain her cultural identity. They were right, it was safe, but it didn't turn out the way they expected. The first young man I met was one of the college's only non-Greek students, David Khoury from Taybeh, Palestine, who later became my husband. David's cousin, Bishop Demetri of the Antiochian Archdiocese, had brought him to Hellenic College to study, and although he was supposed to marry a nice Palestinian girl from his village, and I was expected to marry a boy from my mother's Greek village, God's Providence opened the way for us to marry, which has allowed me to participate in the small Christian culture left in the Holy Land.

David graduated from Hellenic College in 1980 with such a strong desire to help rebuild the Palestinian economy and create opportunities for his people that he worked at two jobs in Boston in order to study for his MBA. We were married in Jerusalem with the late Patriarch Diodoros officiating at the Ascension Chapel in his private residence on the Mount of Olives.

In 1993, on the front lawn of the White House, Israeli and Palestinian leaders ratified the Oslo Peace Agreement, agreeing to a two-state solution, Palestine and Israel, where Muslims, Christians and Jews could live in peace and prosper. With hope in the Oslo Agreement, my husband gathered family investors and returned to Taybeh, believing that now Palestinians and Israelis would be able to live side by side.

With his brother, Nadim Khoury, who is also a Hellenic College graduate, David started the first (and still only) micro-brewery in the Middle East. My husband was so proud to be from Taybeh that he named his beer after the village, and Taybeh Beer went onto the market in August 1995. Of course, people thought we were crazy. How can you sell an alcoholic beverage with a 98% Muslim population? But fifteen years later, many of the journalists who wrote us off are coming back to do stories on the brewery and are discovering that we are the only all-Christian village left in the Holy Land.¹

The Village of Ephraim-Taybeh

The Holy Land has a beautiful history of native Christians tracing their roots back to the time of the holy apostles, when our village of Taybeh was known as Ephraim. Its history extends back to 5000 B.C., and it is mentioned

¹ For the purposes of this interview, the term Holy Land is used to define the state of Israel and modern Palestine. Historically, many Christians have considered parts of southern Lebanon and Jordan to be part of the historical territory of the Holy Land, the old area of the Levant.

in the Gospel of St. John, after Lazarus is raised from the dead: *Jesus therefore walked no more openly among the Jews; but went there to a country near to the wilderness, into a city called Ephraim, and there continued with his disciples.* (Jn. 11:54)

When St. Helen came to the Holy Land to recover the holy places, she set up her camp in our area, the biblical Ephraim. Local Christians certainly would have told her that Jesus was received here before His crucifixion. Our oral history tells us that she built one of the first churches in the Holy Land at Ephraim, the ruins of which can still be seen today. On each major site connected with the Lord's life, she erected monumental churches: the Church of the Nativity in Bethlehem; the Church of the Holy Sepulchre in Jerusalem; and the Church of the Ascension on the Mount of Olives. In other places she built smaller churches, or at least marked the place with a cross.



4th-century ruins of Church of St. George, Taybeh.

The village's name was changed when Saladin, the Muslim conqueror, came to the area in 1187. The local Christians really believed in the gospel of love, and when they fed his hungry soldiers and horses, he said, "You are Taybeen," meaning, "You are good." Our oral history says that, from then on, the village was called Taybeh. In regards to food, Taybeh also means "delicious," which is another reason my husband named the beer after the village.

David is very proud of being from this village and, in fact, his grandfather was the parish priest of the Orthodox Church of St. George in Taybeh. In 1931 he traveled to the Persian Gulf and to South America to raise money to rebuild the church we pray in today. In 1948, after the United Nations declared Israel a Jewish homeland, his son, my father-in-law, lost his job at the Jaffa Post Office and his place of residence in Jaffa to the incoming Jewish refugees from Europe. Instead of fleeing to one of the refugee camps, my father-in-law came back to the village to begin life over again. My husband's family tree goes back 600 years in Taybeh. It is a unique place that has survived many

wars, occupations and catastrophes, and since 1967 is surviving the present Israeli military occupation. Today David is the mayor of the village, and his first cousin, Fr. Daoud, is the priest of our Orthodox Church of St. George.

Christians in the Holy Land

RTE: Wonderful. We can't possibly give a thorough history of the Israeli-Arab conflict in the context of this short interview, but can you tell us how many Christians are left in the Holy Land, and give us a brief background of the history of these demographics?

DR. KHOURY: Yes. After the terrible Jewish holocaust of WWII, there was international support to give the Jews a homeland, and in 1948, the Jewish Zionists, who had been growing in numbers, declared Israel a Jewish state with the approval of the United Nations. Under the terms of the agreement, Israeli Jews would have received 55% of the land of Palestine, and the Arab state of Palestine would have had 45%. At the time of the declaration, Jews legally owned 6% of the land of Palestine.

The Palestinians naturally fought this decision, which overnight deprived them of more than half of their ancestral lands and homes. In order for Israel to be established, more than 500 native Palestinian villages were razed to the ground and 750,000 Palestinians (80% of the population of present-day Israel), fled to save their lives. They believed that an international, or at least a neighboring Arab army, would surely come to save them, but that army never appeared. Most of these people went into U.N. camps in Gaza, the West Bank, Lebanon, Syria and Jordan. They gave birth to their children and grandchildren and now we have more than seven million Palestinian refugees in those camps.

For the last half century we've heard of these huge Palestinian refugee camps, and we have to remember that they began from the people who fled their homes and properties in Haifa and in Jaffa in 1947-49. After 1949 the Jews became a majority in Israel.

The term Palestinian refers to the Arabs—Christian and Muslim—whose historic roots can be traced to the territory of Palestine. Before 1948, the Christian presence in all of the Holy Land is estimated to have been at least 13% (some say as high as 25%) of the native Arab population. Today, there are over 4 million people in Palestine who live in Gaza and the West Bank, of whom 98% are Muslim and less than 2% (about 60,000) are Christian. Most

Christians live in mixed communities, though, our village, Taybeh, is the last completely Christian village.

RTE: You mean that you are the last Christian village in the Holy Land?

DR. KHOURY: Yes. The last completely Christian village. We live next door to six million Israelis in the State of Israel—a Jewish majority of five million with one million Israeli Arabs, descendants of those native peoples who managed to stay on after the institution of the Israeli state in 1948, although they too lost lands and homes. Of the Israelis of Arab ethnicity in the State of Israel, less than 2%, approximately 110,000 are Christian. Before 1948, 50% of Jerusalem's population was Christian; now Christians in Jerusalem are about 4%, approximately 10,000 faithful.

RTE: How are the Orthodox Christians faring in Palestine?

DR. KHOURY: As I mentioned, in the West Bank and Gaza proper we have less than 60,000 Christians, less than 2% of the total Palestinian population. A great number of Christians have been lost to forced emigration as a result of the Israeli military occupation and blockade of Palestine. We are also losing our Christian presence because Christians have a birth rate of 2.1% while the Palestinian population has a birth rate between 3.3% and 3.9% in Gaza. So the average size of the Christian family is around three to four children, while for the overall population it is five to seven. Orthodox Jewish families sometimes have up to ten children.

The majority of Palestinian Christians are Orthodox by birth, but in the last few decades the Roman Catholics and Protestants have been so charitable at meeting people's urgent social needs that many people have begun praying in other denominations. Catholic Charities, for example, has been very generous in paying school tuitions and giving Palestinians affordable housing and work, especially with our terrible 60% unemployment. After receiving this support, when Catholic or Protestant clergy say, "Wouldn't it be nice to see you in church on Sunday?" the Orthodox go with pleasure. Often, unfortunately, they lack full knowledge of their Orthodox faith and since there are so few Christians left in the Holy Land they tend to associate with each other more readily than in other places. Also, Christian missionaries in Palestine are forbidden to convert Muslims or Jews, so the Protestants, particularly, turn their energies toward converting the Orthodox. The numbers in our Orthodox churches are diminishing.



As Orthodox, we are the largest Christian denomination in numbers, but we give the least humanitarian services to people. In contrast, there are only 2,500 Anglicans in the Holy Land, but they give the most in terms of pre-schools, nurseries, grammar schools, homes for the elderly, hospitals, and clinics. It's amazing that the smallest number of people give the most services to both Christians and Muslims.

We do have Christian schools in Palestine and we need these schools to exist whether they are run by the Orthodox, Lutherans, Roman Catholics, or the Anglicans, because Christians like to associate with other Christian people and to have Christianity taught in school. Many moderate Muslims also like to have their children go to Christian schools because of our non-violent message. In these schools we try to present Christ's love and peace, which means not only loving our neighbors, but our enemies as well. These Christian schools offer computer classes, sports, French from the fourth grade and English from the first grade—a little more than what the government schools offer, so this is another reason why the Muslims like our schools, and why, in the Christian schools, Muslim students are in the majority. We are a minority even in our own schools, but these Christian institutions are still very important.



Mayor David Khoury.

RTE: What is life like for Palestinian Christians?

DR. KHOURY: Palestine is under military occupation by Israel, and has been since 1967. In 2002, Israel began building what they call a "security fence," which is a 26-foot-high, 280-mile concrete wall that has affected about 80% of Palestinians. For example, if you live near the wall, you used to walk across the street to go to school, but now you have to go all the way around by the gate. What used to be a one-minute walk to your school ends up being an hour or more. You used to go across the street to check on your grandmother or to work in your dad's shop, but now the wall separates people from their families, from their own lives. The wall went up, not on any internationally recognized borders, such as those of 1967; it went where Israel wanted it to

Opposite: Maria C. Khoury

go. It was also a clever way for Israel to confiscate more Palestinian land by putting it on the Israeli side of the wall.

After the Oslo Accords, I heard Americans say, "Oh, those Israelis were so nice, they gave the Palestinians a country," but they don't realize that Yasser Arafat gave up a great deal in signing the Oslo Agreement. By the accords we were divided into sectors A, B, and C, and although the land is internationally recognized as autonomous Palestinian territory, illegal Israeli settlements have been built on Palestinian land for decades, which gives Israel a reason to defend their citizens and occupy Palestine. There are now approximately 500,000 extreme right wing Jewish people in these illegal settlements who believe that God promised them this land as the chosen people. New illegal settlements are continually being built against the protest of the international community. Israel has stated many times that their goal is a 100% Jewish homeland.

RTE: What has the international community said about the wall?

DR. KHOURY: On July 9, 2004, the International Court of Justice of the United Nations declared that Israel must cease construction of the wall and immediately dismantle sections located in the occupied territories, repeal related legislative and regulatory acts, compensate for the damage caused, and either return Palestinian property or provide compensation if return is not possible.² None of this has been done.

Bethlehem

Many Christians abroad don't realize that this 26-foot concrete wall now completely surrounds Bethlehem, which is internationally recognized as Palestinian territory. In my area near Ramallah, there is another wall, also completely closing us in, and a third up north in Jenin. Because we aren't allowed to travel freely between these areas without going through the harassment of Israeli checkpoints, they are like small prison camps, intended to disassociate Palestinian communities from one another.

Also, in many cases, in building the wall, Palestinian land was arbitrarily and illegally included on the Israeli side. In Bethlehem we had the Cremisan Winery, run by Italian monks for 120 years, which provided jobs to Bethlehem Christians and was traditionally viewed as a Palestinian winery. But in 2008, when the Israelis finished building the wall, they put fifty dunums

² <http://www.un.org/apps/news/story.asp?NewsID=11292&Cr=palestin&Cr1>

(about twelve acres) of Palestinian land, including the winery, on the Israeli side. As a result, all of the Bethlehem workers lost their jobs because the wall is now between them and the winery and they cannot get to work. An adjacent Palestinian pre-school as well as a small Roman Catholic seminary operated by the Celestine sisters were also isolated on the Israeli side and the teachers and students no longer have access to these schools.

We also have about 150 Christian families on the borders of Bethlehem, whose school, work, and medical care was in town. The wall has cut them off, and not only can they no longer go into Bethlehem to fulfill their daily needs, but neither will the Israelis give them permits to go to Jerusalem. They've lost their jobs, schools, and access to hospitals and are consigned to a closed corridor, a no man's land.



Wall around Beit Sehour, near Bethlehem.

How long can you stay in a place like this, even if your ancestors have lived here for thousands of years? Some people in this area literally have the concrete wall on all four sides of their house due to Rachel's Tomb being wrongly seen as only a Jewish holy site.

Before September 2000, Bethlehem had almost 25,000 Christians. Over 3000 Christians left Bethlehem between 2000-2003, after the Israelis bombed and destroyed many of the Christian homes because Palestinian Muslim fighters were using them as cover to shoot at the illegal Israeli settlements surrounding the town. The army came in to crush them, and many residents of Bethlehem left because they couldn't handle the bombs falling on top of their heads. In twenty-five years, if the situation stays as it is now with the harsh Israeli occupation policies, there will be hardly any Christians left in Bethlehem.

The economic, political, and religious situation has become even more difficult because the Israelis now control tourism, even Christian pilgrimage. When people come to the Holy Land with an Israeli tour company, the guide says, "You know, it's really dangerous to go to Bethlehem; it's under the Pales-

tinians and the Palestinians are terrorists.” When you have a group of Christians who don’t buy this and insist on seeing the Lord’s birthplace, the guides may agree to take you to the Church of the Nativity, but you won’t be allowed to shop at the square or in the local shops, you won’t be allowed to eat at the little traditional restaurants around Nativity Square, and you won’t stay overnight in any of the hotels that Christian Palestinians own in Bethlehem.

Instead they will take you souvenir shopping in malls in Jerusalem or Tel Aviv, and to Jewish restaurants and hotels in West Jerusalem. I tell people, “If you are making a pilgrimage to the Holy Land, pay attention to who your travel agent and guides are.” Will you be going to Christian places and seeing real Christian communities? These Bethlehem families who sell beautiful locally-made souvenirs and gifts are often descendants of people who have been living and working around the square for hundreds of years. Please ask or even insist on having a Christian tour guide when you book your pilgrimage.”

RTE: Can you give us the names and e-mails of good Christian travel agents in Jerusalem or Bethlehem?

DR. KHOURY: I think one of the most interesting agencies is Alternative Tourism Group-ATG operating out of Bethlehem, at www.atg.ps on the internet. Also, Shepherds Tours and Sindbad Travel in Jerusalem are excellent Christian-run travel agencies that can partner with American or European travel agencies. They can be reached at www.shepherdstours.com, and at www.sindbad-tours.com. Rula Khoury, originally from Taybeh, also promotes tours to the holy sites (taybehtours@gmail.com), and Fr. Ilya Gotlinsky, who is based in New York, guides Orthodox tours from America to the Holy Land (www.orthodoxtours.com).

RTE: After your account of the troubles, some readers might be hesitant to go to Bethlehem and Taybeh. Are the West Bank and Bethlehem safe for pilgrims?

DR. KHOURY: No foreign tourist or pilgrim has ever been harmed, and the Israeli army allows international passport holders freedom of movement on a legal visitor visa (which Americans and most Europeans obtain automatically at the airport.) Although some foreign volunteers and journalists in the midst of the fighting have been hurt, even at the height of the violence in

2001 and 2002, visitors safely traveled in and out, and it is much safer now for foreigners to visit Jerusalem and Bethlehem.

RTE: How are the people of Bethlehem responding to these conditions?

DR. KHOURY: As we all know, since 1948, when the Israelis took over Palestinian properties, there has been fighting between the Palestinians and Israelis, but we also have a lot of non-violent action in Palestine, both Christian and Muslim, that you rarely hear about in the news. For example, on the outskirts of Bethlehem is the 80% Christian town of Beit Sahour, the neighborhood of Shepherd’s Field, where the angels appeared to the shepherds to tell them of Christ’s birth. Illegal Israeli settlements have appeared in Beit Sahour, which are eating up Bethlehem’s land and encroaching on ancient Christian holy sites. Well known Palestinians working for peace here are Dr. Mazin Qumsiyeh³ and Sami Awad, director of the Holy Land Trust, who protest against the illegal Israeli settlements in Beit Sahour. We also have the Palestinian Center for Rapprochement Between People, headed by George Rishmawi. In the village of Bil’in, we’ve had nonviolent protests every Friday against the wall that has taken so much of their farmland and denies the village farmers access to their own fields, and also in the village of Budrus. So, this nonviolent action is happening, but we also have Israeli and Palestinian fanatics that swallow up the voices of normal people on both sides.

RTE: In preparing for our interview, I read that the Christians of Beit Sahour have sponsored a program called “Break Bread, Not Bones,” inviting Israeli families of goodwill to come and spend a weekend in a Palestinian home. Still, as Gandhi’s experiment showed, nonviolent action often has a heavy cost. Many people don’t know that in 1989, when Beit Sahour refused to pay taxes for precisely the same reasons that Americans had the Boston Tea Party (“No taxation without representation”), the Israeli military authorities blocked food shipments to the town for 42 days, cut the telephone lines, barred reporters, and raided over 350 homes, seizing millions of dollars in money and property. They also refused to let the consul-generals of Belgium, Britain, France, Italy, Greece, Spain, and Sweden into the town to investigate the conditions. In this instance, non-violent action was brutally punished. Nor have things improved: none of the 130 home-based traditional

³ Dr. Mazin Qumsiyeh, former Associate Professor of Genetics at Duke and Yale Universities. A native Palestinian, Dr. Qumsiyeh is an advocate for Palestinian refugee rights and authored *Sharing the Land of Canaan: Human Rights and the Israeli/Palestinian Struggle*.



handicraft workshops that have been run by local families for centuries can export to Jerusalem or sell to local tourists.

DR. KHOURY: Yes. Another group that is trying to bring awareness is the International Solidarity Movement, which started in Palestine around 2000. People from other countries are invited to live in Palestinian communities and go back to their countries to bring awareness of these human rights abuses by Israel. In December, 2009, Palestinian Christian leaders issued the Kairos Palestine Document (www.kairopalestine.ps), calling on churches around the world “to say a word of truth and to take a position of truth with regard to Israel’s occupation of Palestinian land.” From 2002, the WCC also initiated the Ecumenical Accompaniment Programme in Palestine and Israel (EAPPI) which brings volunteers to our area every six months to take back their eyewitness experiences to their churches.

Taybeh: Water, Roads, Trees and a Wall

RTE: How has all of this affected you in Taybeh?

DR. KHOURY: Ever since I began living in Taybeh in the early 90’s, I’ve felt I was in a psychological prison because there are checkpoints everywhere, which means soldiers with machine guns, who may or may not let you pass. In the 1990’s you always had to identify yourself and you often had to have permits to pass through the checkpoints, but with the concrete wall in 2002, this psychological prison became a physical prison.

In my village of Taybeh we have three illegal Israeli settlements surrounding us that control all of the bypass roads and all of the natural resources. We have no access to the roads going in or out of our village to Jerusalem without Israeli permission, although most countries recognize the Palestinian Occupied Territories. The Israeli settlers have paved roads, but even when we can obtain a permit, they only allow us to use the steep gravel back roads with large potholes that often damage our cars and are extremely dangerous in the winter rains. This is a form of punishment for Palestinians. Even on these back roads we are stopped by Israeli soldiers at checkpoints along the way, but this is the only way we can get to work or to school in Ramallah. I’ll return to the problem of permits and checkpoints in a moment.

In terms of natural resources, the Israelis now also control all of the water resources. In Taybeh we don’t have water on Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday,

Opposite: Taybeh, Palestine.

or Thursday. Our water is completely shut off, although the Israeli settlements ringing our village have water 24 hours a day, seven days a week. If all of us were going without water, I'd think, "Fine, this is what we need to do to save water," but when this only applies to the Palestinian villages, it is pure discrimination.

RTE: Just a moment. You are in the desert and you have no water for four days out of seven?

DR. KHOURY: Yes. Another huge problem is the deliberate ecological devastation of Palestine by the Israeli army. Since 1967, over a million trees have been uprooted in Palestine; half of that number were destroyed in the last decade on private Palestinian land. Most of these were olive trees and many of our families depended on the olives for a livelihood, as there is very little work. This systematic uprooting by the army not only destroyed these families' livelihoods, but has drastically hurt nature in an already vulnerable region. The Israeli settlers burned twenty-five of our own Khoury family olive trees in 2002 when they destroyed 125 olive trees on Taybeh land. These olive trees were 500, 600, 700 years old. It's a tragedy for both the people and the earth.

RTE: How terrible. Are these people able to find work elsewhere?

DR. KHOURY: I'm returning to that now. The roads, as I was saying, are our village lifelines. News in the West usually says that these checkpoints are for the security of Israel, but in my case I'm living in the Palestinian village of Taybeh and am going to the Palestinian town of Ramallah to take my children to school. Before 2000, I could be in Ramallah in fifteen minutes, but because the illegal Israeli settlers in Ofra want to punish Palestinians, they shut down the road. For ten years now, no one has made them accountable to reopen it. In 2002 and 2003, when I was taking my children to the Friends' School in Ramallah, it was a two-hour nightmare to get to school every day, and if we managed to get there, another two hours back. We had to start at 6:00 a.m. to be at school by 8:00—a trip through four or five checkpoints with long lines at each one to get, not from Palestine to Israel, but from one Palestinian town to another. Many times, when I was at the last checkpoint and could see the school, the Israeli soldiers would stop us and say, "This road is closed. You can't pass." This is intended to strip you of your human

dignity, and to mentally harass you to the point that you say, "I just can't live here anymore."

It really takes all of Christ's love in your heart to remember that the Gospel says, not just "Love your neighbor," but "Love your enemy," because what you say to that soldier and your prayer for him is what distinguishes you as a Christian. When I tell him, "God protect you today," I have my son on the other side punching my arm and saying, "Mom, you should tell him, 'God, take you away,' because he's stopping us from going to school." Every single day I'm challenged to teach my own children my Orthodox Christian values.

Now, with the wall, things are much more difficult. Before the wall was built, if our Taybeh Brewery employed an Israeli driver and had a truck with Israeli plates we could go through any checkpoint to get our Taybeh Beer into Jerusalem, even if we had to wait eight hours or were turned back altogether at the checkpoint and had to wait for another day. But now, to make things even more difficult for Palestinian businesses, there are designated commercial checkpoints, and Palestinian and Israeli trucks may not pass them, so we have to employ two trucks and two drivers, a Palestinian truck and driver from Taybeh to the checkpoint, and an Israeli truck and driver from the checkpoint to Jerusalem.

Although Jerusalem is only twenty-five minutes away from the brewery, the wall's new commercial checkpoint with a scanner is three hours out of the way. So, our Palestinian truck drives three hours to the checkpoint, spends six or eight hours getting through, unloading, and repacking, and then makes the three-hour return to Taybeh. Our Israeli truck makes the same trip from Jerusalem, picks up the merchandise, and drives back to Jerusalem. What used to be a twenty-five minute ride for one driver, now takes two trucks, two drivers, twenty hours of work and travel, and seven times the gas.

Permits (or Not)

From 2000, Palestinians have needed permits to use the by-pass roads to go to Jerusalem or to the airport and good hospitals. You need a permit for everything, and even if you manage to get a permit after hours of forms, lines, and waiting, the permit will expire. Whether a permit is good for one day, or one week, or one month, you always face the long process of obtaining a new permit each time.

I've gone to the American Consul to beg for help many times, "Please, give my husband, who is an American citizen, a permit to fly out of the Ben-Gu-

tion airport.” The response from the consul is, “When it comes to the Israelis, there’s not much we can do.” But I still don’t give up. I keep thinking that perhaps as a woman, as a Christian, as an American citizen, I might receive special privileges, so I go to the Israeli captain at the district coordinating office (DCO) and beg him, “My husband is the mayor of Taybeh. You know he doesn’t belong to any militant group. Please give him a permit to use the Tel Aviv airport, so that he can quickly fly out to check on our children in Boston.” The answer from the Israelis is that they don’t want to see Palestinians at the Tel Aviv-Ben Gurion Airport, so David has to spend two days crossing the Jordanian bridge to use the airport in Amman, Jordan. Even if you are an American citizen, as a Palestinian, you can’t use the Tel Aviv airport without a permit, but if you are an Israeli and an American there is no problem. There are many such discriminatory laws against Palestinians instituted by Israel.

We go through similar struggles to get permits to enter Jerusalem. For example, the British Consulate will serve Taybeh Beer for special occasions like the Queen’s Birthday in June, or the Spanish Consulate will serve it for a national holiday. We have official embassy invitations and would like to attend to show our appreciation, but although we can import the beer with difficulty, the Israelis won’t give my husband, the owner of the company and an American citizen, a permit to travel. Even if David manages to get a permit, he won’t be allowed to ride with our driver when he delivers the beer, because David can only go to the Qalandia checkpoint, where the Palestinians walk like cattle through metal bars to enter Jerusalem. If you have a permit, why can’t you use any checkpoint? This is illogical; the layers of punishment and frustration are mind-boggling.

Before 2000 we were able to get such permits, but since September 28, 2000 an extra cycle of violence started when former Israeli Prime Minister (then the Defense Minister) Ariel Sharon made a provocative visit with 1000 Israeli police to the East Jerusalem Temple Mount complex, which is also the site of the Dome of the Rock and al-Aqsa Mosque, the holiest Islamic site

4 <http://www.ariel-sharon-life-story.com/16-Ariel-Sharon-Biography-2000-Visit-to-the-Temple-Mount.shtml>. Accessed 8/10/2010.

5 East Jerusalem: Under the 1947 U.N. Partition Plan, Jerusalem was designated an international city, part of neither the proposed Jewish or Arab states. During the 1948 Arab-Israeli War, the western part of Jerusalem was captured by Israel, while East Jerusalem (including the Old City and the Temple Mount) was captured by Jordan and these boundaries were ratified by the 1948 Armistice Agreements. During the Six-Day War of 1967, Israel captured the West Bank, including East Jerusalem, and in November 1967, the United Nations

outside of Mecca. A few days later he explained his visit, saying, “the Palestinians must recognize the historical right of the Jews to their capital, and particularly to the Temple Mount.”⁴ It was clear to the international community that he was restating Israel’s claim of sovereignty.⁵ Muslim people were offended, began protesting, and all hell broke loose. We haven’t had a normal day in the Holy Land since. Also, since 1967, the Israeli army has demolished more than 24,000 Palestinian homes, and in the last decade alone we’ve had over 39,000 people sustain major injuries. Six thousand have lost their lives, usually from being at the wrong place at the wrong time, including thousands of children on their way to school.

RTE: I would find these numbers incredible, but unfortunately I had personal experience of this when I was in the Holy Land for extended periods in the early 1990’s. In 1995, I was in an Arab taxi going from Jerusalem to Jericho on, as you



Palestinian child next to demolished home, with new Israeli settlements in background, 2004.

say, one of the gravel-rutted back roads. As we came up over a rise in a hill, we saw Israeli soldiers with heavy equipment bulldozing down a Palestinian village. The villagers were standing by the roadside with some household goods scattered around them, guarded by soldiers with guns; the women and children were crying. An Israeli soldier, obviously angry that we had come upon the scene, waved us over. He demanded our identification, and copied down the driver’s name and license number. When he saw I was American he leaned in the back window and leered unpleasantly in English, “San-i-tation.” He then said something to the driver in an undertone, who shook his head. As we drove away, I asked what the soldier had said, and the driver replied, “He said: ‘I have your name. You didn’t see anything, did you?’”

Security Council Resolution 242 was passed, calling for Israel to withdraw “from territories occupied in the recent conflict”. In 1980, the Knesset passed the Jerusalem Law which declared that “Jerusalem, complete and united, is the capital of Israel.” This declaration was declared “null and void” by United Nations Security Council Resolution 478; nevertheless, Israel forcibly incorporated East Jerusalem and several neighboring villages into the municipality of Jerusalem. This incorporation, amounting to 111 km² (43 sq mi) of West Bank territory, has also been condemned by the UN and the international community.



Gaza and International Aid

DR. KHOURY: Yes, unfortunately that happened over and over. Today, things are even worse than in 1995. For instance, 80% of the people in Gaza can't live unless someone gives them flour, rice and oil. They don't even have enough drinking water, and they live on less than \$2 a day.

The 22-day Israeli attack on Gaza in 2008 was particularly dreadful because more than 1,400 Palestinians were killed and 5000 injured. Of the Palestinians killed, 313 were children and more than half of the Palestinians killed were unarmed. On the Israeli side, 13 people were killed, three by "friendly fire" (that is Israeli fire). Many schools, factories, and the U.N. buildings were badly damaged, as well as over thirty mosques. If something had happened to one Jewish temple, you would have heard about it all over the media, but when thirty mosques are destroyed in Gaza, the Palestinians are just supposed to take it.

This has resulted in Muslim Palestinians deepening their Islamic identity. When I first came to Ramallah in the early 90's, I would see nine women on the street in modern Western clothing, as opposed to one dressed as a fundamentalist Muslim. Now in Ramallah, there are nine women in Islamic dress to each one who is not.

We American taxpayers have been supporting Israel since 1948; this money has been used for the occupation and the wall. We are now providing Israel with \$7 million *each day* in military aid, a total of \$58 billion in military aid since 1949.⁶

When I'm in the U.S., I always ask Americans to be more aware of what Israel is doing; I don't want to lose hope that contacting senators and congressmen can do something, even though the Israeli lobby is extremely powerful. But in June of 2009, days after President Obama called for a freeze to the illegal Israeli settlements, the Israeli Defense Minister defiantly authorized the building of 300 new homes in Givat Habrecha, near Talmon. As I mentioned previously, there are now about 500,000 illegal Israeli settlers in the West Bank, including East Jerusalem, which has never been internationally recognized as Israeli territory.

RTE: And what kind of U.S. aid do Palestine and Gaza receive?

⁶ U.S. Aid to Israel statistics: www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/jsource/US-Israel/US_Assistance_to_Israel.html

Opposite: Awaiting the Holy Fire, Holy Saturday at the Lord's Tomb, Jerusalem.

DR. KHOURY: The U.S. has never given anything for military aid, but since the Oslo Agreement it has annually given varying amounts of humanitarian and economic aid, depending on the administration and U.S. interests. This humanitarian aid is linked to Palestinian cooperation with U.S. foreign policy. Different European countries have contributed more substantial long-term assistance.⁷

Access to Christian Holy Sites

RTE: What are the long-term hopes of Palestinian Christians?

DR. KHOURY: We want to find a way to share this sacred land, because it is sacred to all. We don't understand why Jerusalem has to be all Jewish. Our Lord and Saviour was crucified and resurrected in Jerusalem and we want to have access to our holy sites, to be able to worship as Christian people. For a Christian, the Life-Giving Tomb of Christ is the most important holy site in the world.

RTE: Palestinian Christians are not allowed to go to the Holy Sepulchre?

DR. KHOURY: Not unless we have permits. The Israeli army sometimes gives a few permits on Christian holidays, but this is completely arbitrary. They may let the Catholic nuns from Taybeh, for example, take a bus to Jerusalem, while they deny the Catholic nuns from Al-Ahliyyah College in Ramallah the same permit. It doesn't make sense.

Even for our celebration of the coming of the Holy Fire on Holy Saturday, we may have Palestinian Christians who have finally received a permit to go into Jerusalem, but over the past two years, once you enter Jerusalem you now have to have another permit to go to the Holy Sepulchre. That means a second set of checkpoints from the gates of the Old City to the Holy Sepulchre. You might finally obtain that permit to Jerusalem, only to find that once in the city, you are arbitrarily turned back from the church. One of our most urgent demands is for the right to worship.

It took me twenty-five years to get to St. Catherine's Monastery on Mt. Sinai, although it is only four hours away. Sometimes we would get to the Israeli border at Eilat and they would let me across, but refuse permission to my husband (who is also an American citizen). Or, they would decide on other years to let us both across but wouldn't let us take our car; but you can't

⁷ U.S. Aid to Palestine statistics: www.fas.org/sgp/crs/mideast/RS22967.pdf

leave your car at the border because it will be stripped or stolen, and the border guards know this is so. After decades of trying to go to St. Catherine's on our own, I finally joined an Orthodox pilgrimage group. My husband hasn't yet been able to go.

I beg people, "Please, put the Holy Land on your list of worthy causes to support, because when the Patriarch comes out and proclaims, "Christ is Risen" with that beautiful miracle of the holy fire, we want local Christians there to respond, "Truly, He is Risen!" We are very glad that international pilgrims come, but we don't want the local people, who trace their roots to the time of the apostles, to disappear. Although we are small in number, we want this little number to remain.

Taybeh Responds

RTE: How has your village responded to the troubles, and how do you manage to stay in Palestine?

DR. KHOURY: The one thing that is still in each and every person you meet is the willingness to wait for a free Palestine. Israel has forced many Palestinians to emigrate, but it has not succeeded in stealing the will of the people.

As for our family, my husband has such a great love for his country and his family that he feels that the only peaceful resistance we can have as Christians is to live here ourselves, to keep our money here, and to run



Nadim Khoury, Master Brewer, Taybeh Beer.

our business. In 2005, David became the first democratically elected mayor of Taybeh, but because things became much harder at that point politically, and it was becoming extremely difficult to take Palestinian products out of the village to Jerusalem, we knew we had to find creative ways to survive. So, using the good name of Taybeh Beer, we began inviting people to come to the village for a Taybeh Oktoberfest. Just as the profit from a church festival in the United States greatly assists parish expenses, our village festival helps the

small businesses and our five women's cooperatives, who sell more in that one festival than the rest of the year in this artificially collapsed economy.

Both my husband and I work for free for the municipality. Other mayors get paid, but my husband David doesn't, because we are trying to be a role model for people to stay in the land of Christ's Resurrection. We both have American passports, we can leave at any time and live in freedom on the other side of the world, but we don't want to leave these centuries of deep history and the witness that native Christians have always provided.

RTE: Right. What are the five women's cooperatives?

DR. KHOURY: These are Taybeh women who work together to produce and sell embroidery, honey, yogurt, couscous, olives, and olive oil. They make these products to help their families and they equally share the profits. The



Street between houses, Taybeh's historic center.

Taybeh Municipality assists them by advertising, paying for posters, hiring musicians, and running the festival, so these women keep 100% of their sales. I help with administration, fundraising, writing proposals, and inviting musicians. Most of our advertising in the West Bank is by word

of mouth. Because we sell an alcoholic product we can't advertise among the 98% Muslim population, but with the Oktoberfest we have found a way to circumvent the lack of advertising, the collapsed economy, and the Israeli closure, by inviting people who can travel to come to us.

For five years now, international visitors have crossed the checkpoints to Taybeh, come to the Oktoberfest and bought local products. In 1995 about 4,000 people attended, while last year, in 2009, we had over 10,000; what began as a small gathering has become the most distinctive festival in Palestine. It was an extra blessing that twenty-four ambassadors and/or diplomats were present at the Oktoberfest 2009 opening as official representatives for their countries, including the British and American Consul Generals in Jerusalem. For me success each year means that it was peaceful and that it took place.

This is our peaceful resistance, our way of saying that we want to live here and do the normal things that other people around the world take for granted.

RTE: Do you have any support from the international community?

DR. KHOURY: Taybeh has received support for this festival from the Danish, Finnish and British governments. Last year, Denmark gave us \$16,000 and with that we were not only able to make one of the roads safer, but to create a few jobs for a month. The previous year they gave \$5,000 to pay for musicians for the Oktoberfest, and they donated a garbage truck worth \$100,000 to the Taybeh Municipality, an amazing support that has helped us keep Taybeh clean! Last year, the Palestinian Ministry of Finance, with funds from U.S. Aid, was able to pave both entrance roads to our village. Through my husband's leadership we have obtained some amazing support for Taybeh.

RTE: How many people have left Taybeh, and are those abroad able to help?

DR. KHOURY: Before 1967 there were almost 4,000 people in Taybeh. Now we are less than 2,000 and there are more Taybeh natives and descendants of natives living in Jordan, Detroit, and in Guatemala than in Taybeh itself. People want to go to a place where there is freedom, work, and the ability to put food on the table. Taybeh people abroad are still mostly first and second generation immigrants so things are not easy for them, but they do try to help. The United Taybeh American Association has contributed \$20,000 to help us build the Taybeh Post Office, and they also offer a yearly \$1,000 award to the best graduating senior and \$500 to the second best in both science and the humanities. Along with Fr. Constantine Nasr, originally from Taybeh but now at Saint Elijah Orthodox Church in Oklahoma City, the UTAA are also generously helping us to add classrooms to the Orthodox School in Taybeh, along with a new grant of \$750,000 from the American Near East Refugee Agency. This is amazing and unexpected support. Also, for the past decade, North Park University in Chicago has annually given a four-year tuition scholarship to a Palestinian Christian student.

Palestinian Christian-Muslim Relations

RTE: If this question isn't too broad, what are relations like between Palestinian Christians and Muslims, and what is your experience of living under the PLO and Hamas?



DR. KHOURY: The Palestinian Christians and Muslims have had fair relationships over the last thirty years that I have travelled and lived in the Holy Land. They are united with one language and one culture, and they are both fighting the discriminatory Israeli occupation policies. But of course, they differ in faith.

To answer this clearly, I have to give a bit of background. The PLO (Palestine Liberation Organization) represented by the Fatah Party is now the governing body of Palestine; Hamas currently controls only Gaza. From the mid-1970's onward, after its admission to the U.N. with observer status, most of the world recognized the PLO as the legitimate representative of the Palestinian people, and Palestine's Declaration of Independence was



Palestinian Christian girls at Taybeh Oktoberfest, 2008.

accepted by the U.N. in 1988. Only the U.S. and Israel continued to list it as a terrorist organization until the Madrid Conference of 1991, and both finally recognized the PLO as the representative of the Palestinian people in 1993 with the Oslo Peace Agreement.

Many people don't realize that in the early 1980's the Islamic fundamentalist right-wing Hamas organization was actively encouraged in Palestine by the Israeli government with U.S. backing, in order to break the influence of the late Yasser Arafat, who had the strength and charisma to unite Palestinians under the PLO with his moderate Fatah Party. Both Israel and the U.S. hoped that increased religious fundamentalism would encourage more prayer in the mosques and less participation in left-wing groups like the PLO. Palestine had never seen fundamentalism before, and as we know, the introduction of Hamas backfired badly.

With the Oslo Peace Accords in 1993, the PLO laid down its guns, and Yasser Arafat was recognized as the head of the Palestinian Authority by the entire world, Israel and the U.S. included. I truly believe that under Arafat, we Christians had a future in Palestine; he was the lesser of many evils. Not

Opposite: Belltower, Greek Orthodox Church of St. George, Taybeh.

only were some of his close advisors Christian, but his wife, Suha, was an Orthodox Christian who probably converted to Islam to marry.

In 2006, America and the European Union supported free elections in Palestine. The Palestinians were discouraged that, after thirteen years, the PLO-Fatah-controlled Palestinian Authority had neither protected them nor led them to peace. Out of desperation, people will vote for anyone different, hoping the situation will improve. And unfortunately, Hamas, the Islamic right wing party won the elections fair and square, under the microscope of international observers. With 74 of 132 seats, they were able to form a majority government. Hamas was popular because it had sponsored many social services that had been disrupted by the Israeli occupation, including education, medical clinics, youth groups, and day-care. Israel, America, and other nations didn't like whom the Palestinians voted for, so they economically and politically boycotted the new government, which could not survive without funds coming in to run the country.

Personally, I was completely shocked that the Hamas government won the 2006 parliament elections. We did not believe Hamas would ever win, and we worried that under a Hamas government we would have trouble surviving, but as I said, because of the international financial boycott they were not able to stay in power in the West Bank.

In 2007 there was a split; Hamas retained power over Gaza, and America set up an emergency government of Fatah leaders in the West Bank. After 2007, when the government was "rearranged", financial assistance began to return to the Palestinian Authority, as the international community trusts the current Prime Minister, Dr. Salam Fayyat.

RTE: And how about the Arab Christians who didn't leave Israel after 1948—how are they faring as Israeli citizens?

DR. KHOURY: They are Israeli citizens and have the right to vote (there are a few Arabs in the Knesset) but there are many problems. In 1992 Israel passed *The Basic Law of Human Dignity and Freedom*, stipulating that Israel is a "democratic Jewish State", not a state of all of its citizens. Palestinian Arabs who are Israeli citizens receive the least assistance from the government and are therefore the poorest group in Israel. Government-sponsored Palestinian schools are much lower in quality than government-sponsored Jewish schools: the ratio of money spent on Israeli and Palestinian students is about 10:1, and as many as 100 Palestinian villages in Israel, many of which pre-

date the founding of the state, are not recognized by the Israeli government, are not listed on maps and receive no services (water, electricity, sanitation, roads, etc.) from the government. More than 70,000 Palestinians live in these unrecognized villages.⁸

Right now in Jerusalem, in 2010—it began last year—courts are evicting Palestinian families, both Christian and Muslims, from their homes and moving in Israeli settlers. Families from the Silwan neighborhood have been issued evacuation notices to make way for a park, but Jewish families in the same neighborhood have not been asked to move. Both the U.N. and the U.S. registered complaints about the decision, but this didn't help. Over the past decade, more and more Jewish families have been moving into East Jerusalem, which was always majority Arab.

Another problem faced by Palestinian Christians in Jerusalem who are citizens of Israel, is that there are different marriage rules for you than for Jewish Israelis. If you find a Christian you want to marry and that person lives in Gaza, the West Bank, or even the United States, you are not allowed family unification rights, meaning that you cannot bring your spouse to live with you in Jerusalem. If you want to marry that person you must leave Jerusalem. But if you are Jewish you can bring a Jewish spouse, or any other person from anywhere in the world. These immigration policies are aimed at cleansing the city of Palestinians.

RTE: There must also be a great strain on Jewish people who convert to Christianity, or those who legally emigrated there from the former Soviet Union as ethnic Jews, but who expected to practice their Orthodox Christianity. I understand that this Russian Orthodox population has grown, many of whom are now second and third generation.



St. Philoumenos (Hasapis), martyred 1979 at Jacob's Well, Palestine.

⁸ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Arab_citizens_of_Israel, cited 8/31/2010.

DR. KHOURY: Yes, we have at least 200,000 Russian immigrants of Jewish descent who are currently Orthodox Christians, and this number might have risen in the last few years, but the Greek Orthodox Patriarchate in Jerusalem does not have updated statistics.

RTE: When I was in Jerusalem in 1992 and 1995, there were Israeli police taking photos of everyone walking into the Orthodox churches on feast days, hoping to catch the Russian Orthodox Christians of Jewish background in order to deport them. Two Orthodox Christians I met could not go to church for fear of being deported, and the Christians were forbidden to proselytize. I understand that now they can go to school and obtain jobs, but that they are outcasts socially. Christians are still forbidden to proselytize, and there have been incidents of harassment and some New Testament burnings. Christians outside the Holy Land also don't realize that we have a newly-canonized incorrupt new martyr and wonder-worker, St. Philoumenos (Hasapis), who was murdered at Jacob's Well in 1979.⁹

Jewish Support for Human Rights in Palestine

DR. KHOURY: These things do go on, and I also want to emphasize that there are Jewish people in Israel who are for equal rights and who are against the military occupation of Palestine. These are small, but active groups who speak out against what they see their government doing, and often have to bear the consequences of their protest. We are very grateful for their support. "Women in Black" began in Israel in 1988, and is made up of Jewish Israeli women who hold peace vigils in black clothing, sometimes hundreds at a time, asking for the occupation to end. They believe in equal rights for Palestinians.

9 Ed. Note: New Martyr Archimandrite Philoumenos (Hasapis), 1913-1979, was Igumen of the Greek Orthodox Monastery of Jacob's Well, near the city of Samaria, now Nablus (Neapolis) in the West Bank. One week before his martyrdom in 1979, a group of Zionists came to the monastery at Jacob's Well and claimed it as a Jewish holy place, demanding that all crosses and icons be removed. Father Philoumenos pointed out that the floor on which they stood was built by Emperor Constantine before 331 A.D. and had served as an Orthodox Christian holy place for sixteen centuries before the State of Israel was created. In the eight centuries before that, the well had been not in the hands of the Hebrew people, but of the Samaritans. The group left with threats. On November 16/29, 1979, they broke into the monastery, and after tying up Father Philoumenos, tortured him to try to force him to recant his Christianity: his eyes were gouged out, and the fingers and thumb of his right hand, with which he made the sign of the Cross, were cut into pieces. He died as he was struck on the face with a hatchet in the form of a cross, deeply severing his face from hairline to chin, and across his cheeks to his ears. The attackers then defiled the church in abominable ways, leaving Zionist symbols and graffiti. No arrests were ever made by the authorities. In 1984, the body of Archimandrite Philoumenos was found to be incorrupt, as it remains until now, and there have been many reported answers to prayer at his relics. He was glorified by the the Patriarchate of Jerusalem on August 17/30, 2008 and his feast is November 16/29. According to his great-niece Maria, his twin brother, Igumen Elpidios, saw him in a vision in Greece at the moment of his death, saying, "My brother, they are killing me."

There is also Rabbis for Human Rights, an international group of Jewish rabbis who are working for peace and human rights for Israelis and Palestinians. Not in My Name is a group of international Jewish people who say that what the Jewish government is doing to the Palestinians does not reflect real Judaism. Machsom Watch is a group of Israeli Jewish women who stand at the checkpoints documenting human rights violations. (Machsom means "checkpoint".) There is also the Jewish Voice for Peace, Combatants for Peace, and the Family Forum (made up of Palestinian and Israeli parents who have lost children to the conflict) and B'Tselem: The Israeli Center for Human Rights in the Occupied Territories. These small groups give us hope that some Jewish people do care about a just peace.



Palestinian shepherd near Taybeh.

However, in an odd turn of events, for the past few decades, we've had many evangelical Christians in the United States who are very vocal in their support of what the Israeli government is doing to the Palestinians.

Zionist Christians

RTE: How did that come about?

DR. KHOURY: Zionism, a political movement founded by Theodore Herzl in the 19th century to lobby for a secular homeland for the Jews, took on a Christian religious context when 20th-century evangelical Christians, mostly in America, began linking Zionism to their interpretation of Old Testament passages. Now there are many American evangelical Christians, whom we call Zionist Christians, who believe that modern Israel with the guns, the gunships, the bulldozers, the bombers, is the New Israel of our gospels. According to their thinking, once Israel has a 100% Jewish homeland and gains complete control, then Christ will return. They are trying to hasten the Second Coming.



We Orthodox Christians don't hold this view. Our New Testament Israel is a spiritual homeland because the Messiah came and we have been baptized into Christ. Jesus Christ became man through that Hebrew ethnicity, and when we sing and chant in our services about Israel, we Christians, (the Church) are the New Israel. The New Israel is not the physical Israel with its guns. We believe that the Lord has only told us to be alert, to watch, to be ready, but there is nothing we have to do to bring about Judgment Day. That will come in His own time. Yet this grave misinterpretation drives many evangelical Christians to blindly support Israeli policy.

RTE: According to Donald Wagner, who teaches in Chicago and writes for *The Christian Century*, mainstream evangelicals in America number between 75 and 100 million. The fundamentalist and dispensationalist evangelicals, who he says are more likely to be Zionists, number between 20 and 25 million. Evangelical Protestants and Zionist Jews would seem to make very strange bedfellows.

DR. KHOURY: Yes, they are using each other, because in this extreme evangelical Christian view, if Israel does gain 100% of the land and Christ comes again, then the Jewish faith will be wiped out, because the Jews will have to accept the Messiah or die. So they are using each other for the sake of their immediate goals.

RTE: Don't these Zionist Evangelical Christians realize that the Palestinians are suffering as a result?

DR. KHOURY: They don't realize that all of Palestine is suffering, or even about their brothers and sisters in Christ. So now we have this strange dichotomy of evangelical Zionists supporting Israel's Palestinian policies, while even some of the Jewish people in the U.S. do not, as well as some Jewish Israeli peace groups.

Prejudices and Realities in Christian-Muslim Palestine

RTE: What other things do you see that aren't always apparent to Christians abroad? One of our U.S. readers who was at a talk of yours last year said that an Orthodox convert raised her hand after you had spoken about the Palestinian Christian plight and said, "Do you mean to tell me there are good Palestinians?" This level of isolation is sobering.

Opposite: Palm Sunday Cross Procession, St. George Orthodox Church, Taybeh, 2008.

DR. KHOURY: This is a stereotype that we Americans especially suffer from. Even in my own Greek family, people said, “Oh, so David became a Christian for you?” “Isn’t that nice that he became Orthodox for you?” It’s hard for some members of my family to believe that my husband was born an Orthodox Christian. His father was born Orthodox, his grandfather was born Orthodox and served as the parish priest in Taybeh. His Orthodox roots can be traced back 600 years in the village. Our mental capacity for prejudice is so strong that we can get the facts mixed up.

Your average Arab would be, as this woman called them, a “good Arab.” For example, when my son was stuck in Ramallah at midnight because he was out for a school function and had forgotten his key to our room in the city, a Muslim schoolmate’s mother went and picked him up and brought him to their home. If my child woke me at midnight asking if I could pick up his friend, would I be so generous? I’ve had decades of good relations with my Muslim neighbors, and my Muslim colleagues are among the first to call me at Christmas to wish me a Blessed Nativity.

Nevertheless, we certainly have Islamic fanatics and I don’t want to mislead people. In Taybeh we had fourteen houses burned to the ground by a fanatic Muslim mob. For over thirty years there were fair relations between Muslims and Christians, but now we live in a country that has no law and no order. In this case a Muslim family was angry at a Christian man whom they accused of fathering their unmarried sister’s child. They killed and buried their sister in an “honor killing,” and then came and burnt down this man’s house, his mother’s house, his brother’s house, and his cousin’s house. There were twenty-five houses to be burnt on their list; fourteen were actually burnt, and ours was the fifteenth in line. We were very blessed that our house was saved. The only reason that these fires couldn’t be contained earlier was because *the Palestinian police cannot come to our Palestinian village in the West Bank unless they receive permission from the Israeli army*. If the police had been able to come they probably could have saved the first house. Certainly they would have saved the other thirteen. But the Israeli army took six hours to give such permission to the police to come to our area. This was the worst tragedy I have seen in Taybeh.

RTE: Why on earth do the Palestinian police need a permit?

DR. KHOURY: This is part of the problem with the illegitimate Israeli occupation. By the Oslo Agreement we are divided into sectors A, B, and C, and

although this is internationally recognized as occupied Palestinian territory, with the Israeli occupation we cannot move between the three sectors. You cannot pass any checkpoint unless the Israeli soldiers allow you; the Israeli army controls every border and everything in between, even the movements of the Palestinian police and fire trucks.

RTE: How do Taybeh’s villagers deal with this?

DR. KHOURY: We understand that we are a buffer between crazy people on both sides, fanatic Israelis and fanatic Muslims who believe in “an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.” We are trying to say not just, “Love your neighbor,” but “Love your enemy and forgive, as well.” There is no concept of forgiveness in the Muslim and Jewish traditions so we feel that as Christian people it is vital that we witness for Christ’s love and peace. If we want God to forgive us, we need to practice forgiveness on earth and to forgive others. Palestine will never have peace unless there is forgiveness and reconciliation.

Everyone in the West knows that Muslim Palestinians have gone into Tel Aviv and blown themselves up, but do they know that Palestinians never did so before 1994 when an Israeli settler with an assault rifle killed twenty-nine Muslim worshippers and wounded 125 more who were peacefully praying in a mosque in Hebron? People only hear that “Palestinians blow themselves up.” When something becomes public enough to draw international criticism, Israel says, “Oh, we’re sorry. It was an accident.” Yet when the Palestinians do something it’s a terrorist act and they are terrorists.

We Palestinian Christians don’t believe in the violent struggle and we don’t believe in suicide bombings, but because we live the same frustrating life—our human dignity is violated every single day—we understand why this leads people to violence. Nevertheless, as Christians we have to be above these natural responses, and this is why our presence is so important.

The Christian Holy Places

RTE: Are you worried about the Christian holy places?

DR. KHOURY: Yes, I have to say that I am. In 2002, the sixth-century St. Barbara’s Orthodox Chapel, the traditional place of her beheading in the village of Aboud, was bombed by the Israeli army. It was a known cultural and religious site, but how many Christians in the West know that one of their earliest Christian shrines has been blown up? These are Christian holy plac-

es that are being destroyed, this is a deliberate attempt to uproot Christians and our holy places from the land that was made sacred by Christ Himself.

RTE: When Israel targeted southern Lebanon in 2006, some of the “collateral damage” included Orthodox Christian churches that had survived from the 6th and 7th centuries, through invasions and wars. These churches were marked on maps as internationally recognized historic and religious sites, and were known as such to the Israelis. A Lebanese Orthodox cleric who went down to inspect the damage as soon as the cease-fire was announced, said that not only were some of our earliest Christian churches and frescoes destroyed by bombs, but that many of the churches still standing were desecrated by Israeli troops, with horrible graffiti and destruction of the ancient frescoed icons. In some churches, Israeli soldiers had defecated on the altars. We don't hear these things in the news.

Sts. Constantine and Helen, St. George, and the Holy Land's Churches

RTE: Also, Orthodox monks and nuns at the holy sites in Israel have told me that it is often very difficult to continue as caretakers of these holy places. Utilities can be arbitrarily cut off, permits are refused, monastics and clergy are routinely spat on in public by Orthodox Jews, and so on. Saint Helen, whom you mentioned earlier, seems to be someone we should remember to pray to more often. After all, she is the mother of these holy places.

DR. KHOURY: Yes, and I always think how, with no technology and less wealth than today, she built these incredible churches where we can glorify the birth, the crucifixion, resurrection, and the ascension of Our Lord. She did so much to document our Christian roots. Christianity flourished in the Holy Land with St. Constantine the Great and St. Helen, and in fact, did you know that St. Constantine was the first person to call Palestine ‘the Holy Land’? The 5th and 6th centuries saw a huge pilgrim presence in hundreds of monasteries, whereas now we have monasteries with only one monk, such as on the Mount of Temptation, to keep the place safe. In the 6th century there were over 200 monks at St. Sava; now there are less than twenty. For the early Christians it was almost like a fifth gospel—to make this pilgrimage and to walk in the footsteps of Christ.

Saint Constantine was also the first Christian ruler to name churches after St. George the Great Martyr, which is why the Church in our area is called

St. George. The original Church of St. George with his relics, is Lydda (Lyd), near the Ben Gurion-Tel Aviv airport. After his martyrdom, his body was brought to Lydda because his mother had property where Lyd is today. Saint George is the most beloved saint of the Middle East, and many churches are named after him. While we honor him as a saint, Muslims also honor him as a courageous military hero. Because St. George was a high-ranking officer in the Roman army, and they have had some historical experience of his appearing and protecting Christians, Muslims have traditionally been afraid to destroy churches dedicated to him. So, for centuries, many churches in the Middle East have been named after St. George as a way to protect them. In fact, in our village of Taybeh we have three churches named after St. George: the remains of the fourth-century church built by St. Helen; the church that we currently pray in that was also built in the early centuries, destroyed twice by natural means and rebuilt; and the Greek Catholic Church (Melkite).

RTE: I've heard stories from Christians from Constantinople, from the 1950's until now, of Muslims who have had encounters or dreams of St. George telling them to do things to help the Christians. His influence seems to be very much alive in the Muslim world.

DR. KHOURY: Yes, he's often called Al-Khader, the Green One. This is a Muslim title for St. George, whom they identify with a mysterious Muslim prophet. The Christian population of the Holy Land did decrease after the Muslim invasions because if villagers didn't convert to Islam they were often killed. The bloodiest period in the Holy Land, though, was the Crusades, when more Muslims and Jews were slaughtered than were Christians at any period in the history of the Holy Land. The remaining Christian majority began to drop once the Ottoman Empire came to power, which controlled the Holy Land for over 400 years.

RTE: Do you have any idea how Christians lived under the Ottomans?

DR. KHOURY: I know that Abdallah, one of my husband's great-grandfathers, represented the Taybeh community in the Ottoman governing councils as the village chief. I'm not exactly sure how Christians were treated while under the Ottomans, but I know that once the British Mandate was established in 1918 there was tolerance for faith. Nevertheless, Palestinian Christians were usually treated as second-class citizens in each succeeding occupation. For example, under the Ottomans if you were accused of a crime the only way to



escape punishment would be to convert to Islam. In general during the Ottoman period if you converted to Islam, you would receive many social benefits, while Christians suffered psychologically, socially, and economically.

What Can We Do?

RTE: What can we do as English-speaking Orthodox to help the Christians of Palestine? Do you have projects we can support?

DR. KHOURY: I ask people first of all to pray, and then to write to their senators and congressmen about the Palestinian situation. Letters do help. We also have people in Palestine who are trying to create jobs and assist with education to give these people hope to stay here. In the West, however, we often seem to be “out of sight, out of mind.” In 1998, Fr. Daoud Khoury, the priest of our village and my husband’s first cousin, sent out letters about our situation and our desire to raise funds to build homes for Christians in Taybeh to seventy Orthodox churches and people he personally knew in the U.S., but no one responded.

RTE: No one?

DR. KHOURY: No one. Then, in 2000, when I lost my job of training English teachers for eleven schools because the Israeli army had blockaded the roads and I could no longer



Fr. Daoud Khoury and Taybeh Christians receiving the Holy Fire, 2009.

get to work, I turned to these projects as volunteer work in order to keep my sanity. It was such a violent time that you had to keep your mind busy with something productive. I was travelling down roads where Palestinian fighters were killing Israeli settlers at night, and during the day Israeli settlers were shooting at Palestinian workers and children on their way to school. Then the Israeli army came in and occupied all of the Palestinian territories in order to defend these illegal settlements. Now with the wall, it is only violent when the Israeli army invades Palestinian homes or villages.

Opposite: Taybeh Orthodox Church Housing Project.

Nonetheless, there are charitable projects happening in Palestine, and there is a lot of work in our village of Taybeh by the Catholic Church and others. One project that I am very involved in is the housing project of St. George Orthodox Church that I just mentioned. We hope to eventually provide homes for thirty Orthodox Christian families who have neither land nor a home, and who need help to marry and start their families. This project began in 1998 as a housing cooperative with each family putting in \$100 a month, but from 2000 on, it was impossible to save such an amount with 50-60% unemployment, so people stopped paying into the fund. In 1998, my late father-in-law was instrumental in getting some village land owned by the Greek Orthodox Patriarchate in Jerusalem turned over to Taybeh's Church of St. George, so now we don't need to buy land and can use donated funds for the actual building.

We need over \$1,000,000 to build the thirty homes. Over the past decade we've raised \$145,000, which has been used to build the skeleton units—the basic foundation, walls, floor, and roof. The first twelve were finished in 2006, now we are up to eighteen. The families who live in them are finishing the homes on their own if they have building skills by putting in doors, windows, kitchens and bathrooms. Some borrow money from organizations or relatives and three families have already finished theirs and moved in. Anyone interested can give tax-free donations through the Greek Orthodox Metropolis of Boston, and all donations go directly to the housing construction when they are transferred to our church in Taybeh. I don't receive a commission or salary for the fund-raising or administration.

RTE: \$145,000 isn't a large amount for ten years. You don't seem to have found it easy to fund-raise.

DR. KHOURY: Not very easy at all. My Catholic and Protestant colleagues in Palestine come to America and raise \$50,000 in one week for similar projects, but it took me six years to raise the first \$50,000. I've visited more than 125 churches now, and I'd say that less than a handful want to keep the connection going. While I was raising enough to build the first twelve skeleton homes, Catholic colleagues of mine raised \$3 million for a project in the neighboring village of Birzeit which went up before my eyes. Fifty Christian families moved into finished apartment units.

The lack is perhaps more my failure at not knowing how to effectively fund-raise. I simply do not know enough organizations that will help Ortho-

dox causes. The Virginia H. Farah Foundation is the only large supporter that I have been able to connect to my community. I've canvassed Orthodox churches in the U.S. giving talks for years and I believe that the Orthodox are very generous people, but I find that it's a struggle to convince them that we should care about Christians in the Holy Land. Some people say, "Well, you've been fighting for thousands of years. If Christians are disappearing, why should we support a project that has no future?" My point is that we want to keep the small Christian community in Palestine. Even though we are not big in numbers, it is important that there are Christians in the place where Christ was born and resurrected.

I remember when I started asking for help, people used to say things like, "How do I know you aren't going to give this money to terrorists?"

RTE: That's insulting.

DR. KHOURY: Yes, but I understand people's worries because our world is so corrupt. When I set up the fund with the blessing of Metropolitan Methodios through the Greek Orthodox Metropolis of Boston in 2003, I stipulated that if we didn't raise enough for even one house, I would personally make up the difference from the proceeds of my "Christina" books to build that house. The project has not been a failure: \$145,000 is a start and it gives these families hope.

RTE: What are your Christina books?

DR. KHOURY: This is a little book series for children about a faithful Orthodox child named Christina, that I hope will give people simple language to talk to their children about Our Lord Jesus Christ and the Orthodox faith. I use the book profits to pay for my travels, for our church web site, for thank-you letters, and for stamps, postcards and brochures that promote the Taybeh projects. The profits also sponsor five or more children every year at the Taybeh Orthodox School.

Another Taybeh project that I'm involved in is a fund for local scholarships. We are trying to set up an endowment fund. In 2006, our sister church, the Annunciation Greek Orthodox Cathedral in Norfolk, Virginia raised money which we invested in order to use the interest to provide a year's college scholarship to the graduating senior from our St. George Orthodox Church. If there is more than one student, we split it between them. In Palestine, tuition is about \$2,000 a year at a local college. We are doing this to en-

courage our young people to stay and study in Palestine because if they are given scholarships abroad, they often simply don't return. We are losing our brightest students.

Our strongest sister-church relationship is with St. George Greek Orthodox Church of Bethesda, Maryland. Recently, we've also received wonderful support from Holy Trinity Cathedral in Salt Lake City, Utah; and Annunciation Church in Little Rock, Arkansas has raised the most funds out of all the parishes I have visited, giving us over \$10,000 on their own for our housing project. One of the churches on our list which has never forgotten us is Sts. Constantine and Helen in Merrillville, Indiana. Many individuals have also helped us, and I'm sorry I can't name them all here, but I do want to mention Marilyn Rouvelas, who has been a great encouragement to me personally in continuing my ministry.

The other things I would like to ask of Orthodox Christians is to come visit us! The villagers can't come to you, but your presence in Bethlehem, in Beit Sehour, in Taybeh, is a great support and blessing. We have thousands of visitors annually. If you come to Taybeh, I will be very happy to give you a tour of our village and of the Taybeh Brewery. You can contact me about visiting Taybeh at khourymaria@hotmail.com. Even if I am not in town my brother-in-law Nadim and my niece Madees, also a Hellenic College graduate, give tours daily except Sunday from 8am to 4 pm. The number is (970) (972 from the U.S. only) 2 289 8868.

RTE: There are also many Orthodox churches that have prayer groups. We need to put Taybeh, Bethlehem, Ramallah—all of the Christians in Palestine and all of those suffering unjustly to our prayer lists.

DR. KHOURY: In 2002 when things were so incredibly difficult, people would write to tell me that they had prayed and I could feel it. I believe that God does have a plan for us, and when people pray for us, we stay on the path and gain inner peace. It's also my Christian duty to pray at the Holy Sepulchre, at Bethlehem, and in the other holy sites for everyone who has helped or prayed for us.

RTE: How else do you survive psychologically? How do you keep hoping?

DR. KHOURY: I shut myself in this small little world, and tell myself that it's important in these families to have decent housing and that the students go to college. This is a way for me to obey the Gospel teaching when the Lord

says, "Love one another." Another thing that helps me is Mother Theresa's saying that "God is not calling us to be successful, He's calling us to be faithful," and that keeps me feeling that these little projects are important for themselves. I have to focus my energy on the fact that this is what Christ is asking me to do. Also, God sends his angels to take care of us and when people come into my life and give me a good word of inspiration, it's as if they've given me a million dollars to keep faith with what we are doing.

My other great support is my husband and our family; this work actually began when we met at Hellenic College/Holy Cross. In an Orthodox marriage you help each other on the path to salvation, and I've experienced the truth of this in my life.

The most important thing is to give Christians hope that they can stay in Palestine, to try to see the light at the end of the tunnel. Peace could come, and we hope that it is God's will that Christians, even in small numbers, will stay in the Holy Land. When the patriarch's representative brings the Holy Fire to Ramallah on Holy Saturday (because most Palestinian Christians are unable to receive permits to go to the Holy Sepulchre) people gather from all over to take the flame back to their churches to celebrate this wonderful miracle: that Christ is Risen and is in our midst. We believe in the living God, and that it is important to have indigenous Christians in the Holy Land to proclaim, "Al-Masih-Qam! Hakkan Qam!"—"Christ is Risen! Truly He is Risen!" ✦