

Baptist Church in Bethlehem Declared Illegitimate By Palestinian Authority

A week after Prime Minister Salam Fayyad told an audience of evangelical Protestants from across the world that his government respected the rights of its **Christian minorities**, officials from the Palestinian Authority (PA) have informed Bethlehem pastor Rev. Naim Khoury that his church lacked the authority to function as a religious institution under the PA.

The church can still gather to pray, for now, but the PA's decision conveyed on Saturday will have a real impact on the members of First Baptist, which endured numerous bomb attacks during the First Intifada.

"They said that our legitimacy as a church from a governmental point of view is not approved," said Khoury's son, Steven, who serves as an assistant pastor at First Baptist. "They said they will not recognize any legal paper work from our church. That includes birth certificates, wedding certificates and death certificates. Children are not even considered to be legitimate if they don't have recognized paperwork."

The irony, Steven said, is that the PA's announcement comes right after the **Christ at the Checkpoint Conference**. This conference, which took place from March 5 through March 9, was a gathering of approximately 600 evangelical Protestants from across the globe (mostly from the United States) to discuss the theology of **Christian Zionism**, which some evangelicals believe increases the prospect of violence in the Middle East and gives support to Israeli policies that they do not like.

During the opening night of the conference, Palestinian Prime Minister Fayyad told the assembly that his government respected the rights of Christians. Palestinians celebrate

religious holidays together, PA officials attend Christmas celebrations and even attend midnight mass for Christmas, Fayyad said.

“This is what it means to be a Palestinian,” Fayyad said, adding that the PA feels a deep sense of responsibility for the holy places and will allow unfettered access to places of spiritual significance in areas under its control.

Nevertheless, there is a sense among Christians in Bethlehem that **anti-Christian** animus has gotten worse in the city over the past few years, Khoury said. “People are always telling them, ‘Convert to Islam. Convert to Islam. It’s the true and right religion.’”

This is the second time the church has been told it is operating without PA sanction, Khoury said. Other churches in Bethlehem are left alone, said Khoury, who suggested that the church’s love for both the Jewish and Arab people and its belief that both can live in the land in peace may have played a role in the PA’s decision. Prior to the PA, the church, which was founded in 1980, never had a problem with its paperwork, Khoury said.

“We believe it’s people who don’t like what we’re doing and the message we offer,” he said.

The church’s message of reconciliation flies in the face of the propaganda that permeates Palestinian society. Muslim clerics routinely offer up **anti-Semitic rants** on PA television and so-called peace activists have turned the concrete sections of the security barrier in Bethlehem into a canvas for their propaganda, which in some instances proffers a troubling fatalism to its viewers.

For example, one section of the security barrier near the Alrowad refugee camp in Bethlehem depicts two Palestinian youths throwing rocks and another being arrested by Israeli soldiers. Alongside the image, the artist has written in

French and English the phrase, "We can't live, So we wait for death."

Khoury said the Palestinian Authority needs to treat all sects with equality and respect their rights. "The First Baptist Church in Bethlehem has demonstrated its value to the community over the years and proven itself to be a law-abiding church," Khoury said.

Khoury said he will speak to members of Congress in the United States to draw attention to what is happening to First Baptist in Bethlehem.

"We did let them know that we're not going to go quietly on this," Khoury said. "We want our church to be fully recognized equally with all the other recognized denominations. Our church deserves the right to be equally recognized amongst all the other recognized denominations in the PA."

Joann Magnuson, a long-time observer of Christian communities in the West Bank, said she has known the Khourys for at least 15 years.

"I know them to be serious Christians, busy caring for their flock and preaching the **gospel** of love and forgiveness," she said. "It's seems more than coincidence that the Christ at the Checkpoint conference ended and now the Khourys are being targeted."