A Conversation with Sahar Qumsiyeh: A Palestinian Saint’s Perspective

Sahar Qumsiyeh spoke at the Political Science Closing Banquet sponsored by BYUPAS. Sahar’s topic was “A Gospel Solution to the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict.” Before the banquet I had the opportunity to sit down with her and discuss her life as a Latter-day Saint in Palestine.

Sahar has a degree in Math from Bethlehem University, a Master’s degree in statistics from Brigham Young University and PhD in Statistics from the Middle East Technical University.

Please describe your job in Palestine.

Our agency helps Palestinian refugees. Our office is over the West Bank and we provide assistance for them, we provide food, education, and health care. We have an emergency program which provides assistance to the needy and poor. We provide food assistance and temporary job employment for the refugees that were driven out of their homes in 1947. Some of the refugees have lived in camp and our agency has built houses for them over the years. Yet there is still some poverty among them.

Can you describe how your job was a blessing for you?

Before this job, it was really hard to get to church. A few times it was not possible but after the separation wall was built it became really, really difficult and actually dangerous to try and get to church. I used to sneak in a lot of time and then just got to the point where it wasn’t physically possible. So I got this job. Because the job is with the UN and it is in Jerusalem I have a special permit. This permit allows me to get into Jerusalem from 5 am to 7 pm. I can travel freely from Bethlehem to Jerusalem.

How does it feel as a Palestinian to have this permit that allows you to travel?

The younger generation has no idea what is like to move about freely. I knew how it was. Before the separation wall we could drive our cars and go anywhere in the country. These restrictions are somewhat recent. To me going freely back like I already had has been great. It’s been a remarkable change since I went from not being able to go at all to having the UN permit. A lot of people don’t know what it’s like to move freely. This U.N. permit is special since it allows you to enter any checkpoint. The regular permit only allows you to exit from Bethlehem to Jerusalem from only one checkpoint. Which means you have to wait in line for three or four hours every morning to go through the checkpoint. So my permit is special because I can go through any checkpoint. It means going from nothing to a lot.

Can you describe why this separation wall came into being?

The country Palestine is now called Israel. Before the Oslo agreement, we didn’t have an identity, we didn’t have a passport. We were resident of the state of Israel, but we had no residency, no rights, no citizenship, no nothing. In 1995, after the Oslo agreement, it was decided they we would have the Palestinian Authority. With the Palestinian Authority, Palestine gained control over some parts of the West Bank. We now had an identity. Before the Palestine Authority existed, before 1995, we couldn’t raise our flag. In the past if we raised our flag, the Israeli government would make us take it down and burn it. We had nothing; after the Oslo agreement in 1995 we
gained an identity. I could finally say, “I’m Palestinian,” and that would be nationally understood, although there is no country called Palestine. I now have a passport, a Palestinian Authority passport and I now can hang my flag without any problem. But the Israelis gave us control over a really small part of the West Bank. They would give you the center of the town in a really big city. For example, they would give you downtown Salt Lake City, but not all of Salt Lake County. So to get to one Palestinian city from the other you would have to pass through Israeli areas. In 2002 they started building the separation wall which is a 25 foot concrete wall and basically it started out just trying to separate Jerusalem from other areas but then it started surrounding Palestinian cities. For example, the city of Qalqilya has a wall all around it. The wall completely surrounds the city with one exit. So it’s very hard for people to go from place to place. If I wanted to go to Ramallah, which is a 20 mile drive, it takes me two hours because of the wall and I can’t go through Jerusalem. I can’t go the normal way a normal person would go. So there is Palestinian Authority area, but the exits and entrance to these areas are controlled by Israel. To get from one place to another it takes forever because of all the traffic and check points. Access to Israeli areas is not allowed. I can’t for example go to Tel Aviv and other areas in the West Bank. Since we can’t go to Tel Aviv we don’t have an airport. We have to exit the country by land to Jordan and then fly out of Jordan. In the summer because everybody exits by land it becomes a fifteen hour trip to go to the airport in Jordan. This time is spent waiting in line.

How does the separation wall affect you as a member of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints?

So the main problem the wall has caused is that members of the church can’t easily access church meetings. When the wall first came up I couldn’t go to church very often. I went once a year. We have members in Bethlehem and other areas of the West Bank that cannot go to a meeting place in Jerusalem or other areas. Another issue is that members can’t visit other members. Members affiliated with BYU Jerusalem cannot go to the West Bank cities. They are only allowed to go to Bethlehem and Jericho under special circumstances. Normally they aren’t allowed to go to Palestinian cities. So members can be isolated from the church, other members, everything. Of course there is a language problem. So if one person of the branch can visit, they have to speak Arabic or speak a language in which everyone can communicate. There was a family in Tucerin, Tsafirim. When I joined the church my Branch President had me visit with them, we had sacrament meeting with them and we used to go visit them because they couldn’t come to Jerusalem. Then I went to get a PhD and I was gone with my studies and work. I had assumed the family had moved. When I was called as Relief Society President I started to wonder about this family I used to know. I brought it up in branch counsel and they said “What family?” Nobody in the branch knew anything about them—the records were not there. I dug up my old stuff hoping that I could find their phone number. I found it, so I called them. They were still there and nobody had contacted them for ten years. So I started going to visit them and found someone that amazingly spoke Russian and could travel. Again travel is such a problem; there are very few people who can travel. Consulates cannot go to the West Bank and people affiliated with BYU couldn’t go. It has to be someone affiliated with neither of those who could speak the language and had transportation. Our main problem is distances. In a branch a lot of people live far from the building and we meet on Saturday which is the Jewish Sabbath. There are no buses, no taxis, members cannot get to church.
people who live very far away. When you talk about Palestinian, Palestinian distance is relative because a twenty mile distance could mean a three hour trip depending on how many checkpoints and walls you come across and depending on whether or not your even allowed to get there

**How does your faith help you deal with the above problems?**

It helps me a lot, I mean, I don’t know what I would do if I didn’t have the knowledge that I have. I need the gospel in my life because it is really hard. You find that you get angry and you start hating because of the situation there. You start to get angry at the other side for causing this. Unless you understand that they are all children of God and that you have to love them and forgive them. You have to endure what you have; you have to live and to hope that someday things will be better. It has been great to serve in the church I think it is a blessing to help the members and to reach out to them. It takes a lot of effort. There is a lot of pressure on me personally and it’s really difficult because I’m one of the two or three people who speak both languages. We have a lot people in our branch that are English speakers and a few Arabic speakers so I’m one of the few people who can actually communicate with them. So the language is a big issue that we have.

**How do you balance your job and your church calling as a Relief Society President?**

Yes it is hard, my job is very demanding. I actually have two jobs in one. I used to work until midnight to get things done and then I just decided my work is just going to end when it ends and I’m going to do other things. Yes, I’m trying really hard to balance everything but it’s challenging.

**Can you describe the LDS community in the Middle East?**

The LDS community in the Middle East in general is very small. If you look at all of the branches we have in Palestine, maybe 95 percent of the members are American people and other nationalities. We don’t have that many local members. There are a very few number of locals and that applies to other Arab countries. Jordan, Lebanon, and other areas the numbers do tend to be very small. Since there are a few Palestinian members or Arab members we tend to know the members in other countries. I know the members in Jordan and in Lebanon and a lot of them have similar challenges. It is really hard to connect because some members assume that others speak their language. We need to be considerate that there are members who do not speak English. We are in their home country we need to reach out to them and do our best to speak their language.

**Please tell me about your conversion.**

When I came to BYU I wasn’t really interested in the church and never thought that I would join the church. That wasn’t something I thought I would do because I had really heard some strange things about the church. Of course, they were not true. When I came to BYU everybody was so nice. I think the example of the people struck me and it also struck me how much that God was a part of their life. They talked about Heavenly Father all the time. It was really strange, back home they would think you were a freak. One day they were talking about conference and they said they were going to listen to a Prophet. I thought that was the most absurd thing I had ever heard, but I was curious. I wanted to see what this prophet looked like, so I went to watch. President Hunter was speaking, I don’t remember what he said, but I do remember him referring to my land as Palestine. Like I said earlier it had been really difficult for us to lose that identity as Palestinians—to have no currency, no land that we call our own. When I heard him do that and I knew he was American it helped me realize that this cannot be a bad church if their President...
acknowledges my right as a Palestinian. After conference I asked my friend to tell me about the church. She told me everything about her church and everything made so much sense. I grew up Christian, but I didn’t understand a lot of things about Christianity. Yet, when she laid out the gospel plan, why we are here on earth, what we were doing, and where we are going everything made sense. So I started going to church and I read the Book of Mormon. After I was done reading and going to church for a while, I didn’t even need to pray to ask what’s true I just knew it.

Do you think there is a resolution to the Israeli/Palestinian conflict?

The problem back home is the wall. The separation wall has completely divided both people. This is bad because the Israelis only listen to Israeli media and the Palestinians only listen to Palestinian media. Both sides are to the point where they think the other side is scary or horrible because they don’t interact. Now there is a wall between us. When I was young, Israelis came and shopped in my town. We would interact with them. We knew they were good people and they knew we were good people. But now with this separation, this new generation is growing up to hate the other side. They are angry, both sides, because they have both been hurt by things that have happened. It’s not easy to let go of the anger and the hate. I often wonder why the Savior was born in my city of Bethlehem. I thought Bethlehem is not a quiet place with all of the conflict going on. It wasn’t a

coincidence that He was born in Bethlehem. He actually chose the Holy Land for his birth. If you look at all of the events that led to His birth, He wanted to be born there. I often pondered this, it wasn’t until I read the scripture in John that says “Peace I leave with you, my peace I give unto you: not as the world giveth, give I unto you.” I then realized you know He is trying to show us since He is the Prince of peace, that peace only comes through Him.

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trying to show us since He is the Prince of peace, that peace only comes through Him. People can sit and talk. If I hated the person in front of me and I was trying to negotiate a way to establish peace, that is not going to happen. The only way to peace is if you allow the Savior to heal your heart to let go of the anger, to love the enemy standing in front of you. That’s the only way. It was really hard for me to let go of that anger because you can’t live with it, it eats you up. It took me awhile, a lot of prayers to actually let go of the anger, to let go of the hate, and once I did that I found peace. I think that peace is a personal

thing. I don’t know, I see peace only happening if both sides let go of the past and start a new page. The only way to peace is if the wall comes down, if people start talking to one another, and getting to know the other side. That is the only way it is going to happen. I can only hope. I don’t know if it can really happen.