

Palestinians hope talks will end strife at home

By Rob Cullivan
Staff writer

ROCHESTER — Reminiscing about past Christmases spent in Bethlehem, Khader Housebian, a political-science student at Nazareth College, nodded his head and smiled.

"It's a warm feeling when you are in the grotto," the 26-year-old said, explaining his visits to the city's most sacred Christian site. "Everyone will feel it."

In spite of those warm feelings, however, Housebian and 21-year-old Youssef Salman — a fellow Palestinian and resident of Jerusalem — tempered their pleasant memories of Bethlehem with sadder tales of the lives they have led in the Israeli-occupied West Bank.

Since the Palestinian uprising, or *intifadah*, began in 1987, neither Housebian, an Armenian Orthodox Christian, nor Salman, a Catholic attending St. John Fisher College, has bothered to visit Bethlehem on Christmas. The likelihood of being harassed by the Israeli military during the visit outweighs the chance of leaving Bethlehem's holy sites with a sense of peace, the two Palestinian men claimed.

"During the day when you remember the birth of Christ, you don't want to be humiliated," Housebian said.

Both men recalled being hauled in for questioning without ever being formally charged by the Israeli military.

Noting that he did not belong to any Palestinian political organization or armed group in the West Bank, Housebian said he believed he was arrested simply for being a Palestinian.

"I was just on the street when they took me in," Housebian said. "They started beating me for hours. They saw that it was an opportunity for their sadistic desires."

Yet, for the first time in years, these two Palestinians have a hope that such incidents may become a thing of the past.

Housebian, Salman and a fellow Jerusalem compatriot, 19-year-old Fadi Khoury, an Aquinas Institute student, noted that this Christmas is colored by a hue of peace.

That hue can be found in the current talks encompassing delegations from Israel, Syria, Lebanon and a joint Palestinian-Jordanian team.



The latest round of negotiations ended in Washington on Dec. 19. The Palestinian-Jordanian team and the Israelis will meet again on Jan. 7.

One of the primary points of contention in the talks is the status of the territories Israel has occupied since the Six-Day War in 1967 — the West Bank, the Golan Heights and the Gaza Strip. Another territory, the Sinai Peninsula, has already been returned to Egypt as part of the peace agreement forged at Camp David during President Jimmy Carter's administration.

Ideally, the Palestinians want to establish their own independent state in Gaza and the West Bank. At the conference table, however, the Israelis have said they are willing to go only as far as granting self-rule — not independence — to Palestinians living in territory they occupy.

Although the talks have not produced any substantial changes in the current state of strife between the parties, the three Palestinians expressed optimism that the negotiations would produce some benefits.

"It's a good thing," Salman said. "It's important that all of them sit down at one table."

Extremism on both the Israeli and Arab sides has hampered peace for years, the three Palestinians noted. In particular, Khoury pointed out that many extremists offer unreasonable scenarios that will only continue the fighting.

While the diplomats wrangle at the table over just such proposals, young people like Housebian, Salman and Khoury must struggle to obtain a higher education. Universities in the West Bank have been closed during much of the *intifada*, depriving the Palestinians of a chance to attend college in their homeland.

Housebian was a student at the University of Bethlehem — a Catholic institution — before it closed in 1987. He noted that thousands of Palestinians have since met for class at makeshift "universities" located in such areas as hotel basements and hospitals.

But because of the potential for street violence in the occupied territories, the most diligent of students may have second thoughts about attending these "schools," he pointed out.

The desire to help frustrated students like Housebian motivated Father William E. Graf to help arrange the Palestinian trio's educational sojourn in this country.

On sabbatical in Israel from his pastorate at Rochester's Most Precious Blood Parish in 1990, Father Graf met several Palestinians who impressed him with their hospitality. After deciding that he wanted to find a way to repay the Palestinian community for the kindness shown to him, Father Graf sought out Rochester native Father Thomas Rosica, CSB, who is pursuing advanced Scripture studies in Jerusalem.

Together, the priests arranged for the Basilian order — along with some private benefactors — to sponsor the three students' studies here.

Housebian wants to obtain a master's degree in political science, while Salman envisions becoming an accountant. Khoury is brushing up on his English at Aquinas before attempting to attend a college or university in the United States.

All three expressed fondness for their host nation, but Khoury said he was puzzled by some of the questions he has been asked by fellow students. Rather than inquiring about his famous hometown's contentious history, most of his Aquinas counterparts wonder about what form of transportation he uses.

"Do you have, like, cars?" Khoury said, mimicking his fellow students. "There's a lot of guys who ask me about that," he laughed.



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