

During a “hot” interview which made him furious:

Patriarch Theopholus evades answering "Al-quds" question: why don't you file suit to invalidate the transaction of Omar Ibn Al-Khattab Square?

Jerusalem - There is no doubt that the issue of disposal of the orthodox property and endowments in Omar Ibn Al-Khattab Square in Bab Al-Khalil inside the old town has great impact and attracted the attention of the Palestinian and the Arab public opinion. It has shed light on the continuing and hidden conflict to gain control over the old town which contains Islamic and Christian holy places.

This dubious transaction had consequences on the church, its synod and the Orthodox community in Jerusalem, Palestine and Jordan. Thus this dubious transaction was like a spearhead directed to the previous Patriarch Irenius , leading to deposing him from the patriarchy post and the formation of a governmental investigation committee and the actions that followed until the appointment of Theopholus the first as a new Patriarch. His decisions and actions have astonished the members of the community especially after “Al-Quds” has published several reports which deal with specific issues that attracted the attention, like failure to file suit to revoke Bab Al-Khalil transaction until now, the issue of assignment of Al-Shama'a land, the issue of giving up Kafr Samiee land and finally unveiling a new transaction near the train station.

In order to be know the latest updates and to hear the opinion and the responses of the new Patriarch Theopholus to many questions which occupy the minds of members of the Orthodox community in particular and the Palestinian people in general, we held this interview in the Patriarchy in the old town in Jerusalem. We were asked by many persons who are close to the Patriarch to hold this interview, in which he confirmed the presence of a transaction to let orthodox property to Israeli entities. He refused to answer most of the questions and deviated from the context by talking about “Al-Quds” and by assaulting us personally and saying that the origin of Jerusalem is the church. He added that the important matter according to him is his recognition by the Israeli government, before filing suit to revoke Bab Al-Khalil transaction. He denied any relation of the Greek government with what is taking place in the church and that it may have paid some debts and fines on its behalf. On the other hand, he confirmed that he is sill subject to different pressures, but he refused to reveal the sources of such pressures. The full text of the interview was as follows:

Q: More than one year passed on the transaction of disposing of the property of Omar Ibn Al-Khattab Square in Bab Al-Khalil, what did you do to stop and to revoke this dubious transaction in order to recover the endowed Orthodox estates? Patriarch Irenius the first was deposed as a result of that transaction and you were appointed in his place?

A: The first thing we did is that we went to the High Court of Justice against the Israeli government to recognize us. We can not do more than that now, because we do not have legal powers from the Israeli government institutions.

Q: But you can file a suit according to your great powers as the head of the Synod?

Q: In which capacity?

Q: You are the head of the Synod.

A: Yes, but they do not recognize anything. You know that all our banking accounts are frozen. And you know that the president of Israel did not receive us in the official reception which was held by the state of Israel.

Q: They did not officially recognize you as a patriarch but you enjoy the recognition of the Palestinian National Authority and the Jordanian government and you are able to file a judicial petition?

A: True.

Q: You did not answer my first question, why up till today you did not file a judicial petition and you did not support the petition which was filed by the previous Patriarch Irenius the first which is considered the only case till today?

A: When we received the petition it was not in our name. It was not directed to the correct address, but the Archbishop of the Council.

Q: What council? What are you waiting for while you are seeing the settlers and the Israeli companies seeking to control this critical property in Bab Al-Khalil and others?

A: Do you understand? This is a case. You have to use logic. People come here and ask us many questions. But they do not think before they pose certain questions. In what capacity can we appeal all these cases. Second, would you please tell me, who are those people who concluded the transactions with Irenius ? Would you tell me what are these marine dummy companies which concluded the transactions with Irenius ?

Q: The companies which concluded the transaction with the so-called Papademes are known and they have asked the tenants of the premises to pay the rent to them and invited them to its offices to negotiate in order to facilitate the tender of such premises?

Q: They sent a message to Imperial hotel?

A: [Theopholus]- who?

Q: Those companies?

A: Which companies? they are dummy companies that do not exist and if they exist, why didn't Irenius take action against them.

Q: Irenius filed a judicial petition and we have a copy of it in which he claimed for revocation of the transaction, then why you did not support this petition as you are now the new Patriarch and the head of the Synod?

A: Against whom shall we file the petition? Did Irenius file a petition against himself? Can you as a journalist show us this petition? Anyone who pretends to be more nationalistic than the Patriarch should give us a list of names of those who are involved in the transaction and who works to revoke the transaction.

Q: We are not here to distribute certificates of patriotism to the people, but we discuss an issue that concerns the people of Jerusalem and every Palestinian who is interested in the Arab sited in Jerusalem, especially the old town. What did you do to revoke the transaction?

A: It seems that you concentrate on an issue that you do not aware of its dimensions....

Q: What was your post when this transaction was concluded? Was this transaction submitted to you?

A: At this moment the intensity of the interview became high and he said (as you know), it was Irenius who refused to tell us the truth and he always refused that. The second issue that concerns us is where did the money for the price of this transaction go? Who took it? Where is the money? We do not know where the money has gone. I did not know what Irenius did, but where is the funds? Can anyone tell us the place of the money? And if the transaction is proper, let the Israelis complete it with him to the end. It is illegal!! Let the Israeli people complete it with him if it is proper...

Q: I know that the transaction is illegal; my question is that a legal action must be taken in the Israeli Judiciary to revoke .. what..?

He did not allow me to complete the question and began his attack upon me while he pointed with his hand in a very nervous way, saying: "Do you understand?"

Q: I understand your situation but... Then he interrupted me again. Patriarch Theopholus said: This is my answer. Let the Israeli officials, the officials in the Israeli government who are interested in the subject and the people who have interests to conclude the transaction with him [Irenius], what do they want from us?

Q: But Irenius is no longer the problem, but this transaction which has been concluded one year ago and we are waiting for anyone to revoke it. Do you intend to file a suit to revoke it?

Then Patriarch Theopholus started to raise his voice and behaving in an improper manner and said: Why you do not understand. Can't you use your mind for a while? (Then he added in Arabic) Use your mind.. In Arabic with a Greek accent, in an unacceptable manner way, then he stood up and tried to end the interview, but I insisted to continue to obtain answers on 43 questions that I have thoroughly prepared after a careful study.

Q: I am using my mind. I ask you if you intend to file a suit or not, why are you so nervous and trying to evade answering the first question in this interview which you have sought more than we did???.

A: Why you do not understand. You do not understand. Who stood in the face of Sharon's government? Did you do that? Did those major patriots stand against it? At this point, the Patriarch started talking about Sharon's government and its challenge to the Authority and to the Arab world and the whole world in a trial to justify his nervous and confused manner...

He said: Did anyone stand in the face of Sharon?

Q: What Sharon has to do with the acts of the Patriarchy towards its property and belongings?

A: Yes, he was the head of the government at that time. I ask you, I ask you: Why you do not understand?

Then the Patriarch became nervous for a third time and started to stare in my eyes while he was talking in a loud voice. I mean, and excuse me, many people come to me, they are stupid, I am so sorry to say that, but they talk without thinking, even intellectuals. Do you understand me? I do not want to go down to such level.

Q: I ask you about your situation towards disposing of the premises and why you do not try to recover it? And which category in the Orthodox community do you accuse of being stupid and that they do not understand the issue?

A: I will explain to you. In what capacity do you want me to go to the Israeli Judiciary at a time when they do not recognize me. Why didn't you ask me about what I have done as a Patriarch? And about my other activities... You only focus on the premises and the property of the Patriarchy.

In spite of that, I ignored the legal position and the obstacles that were put on my way and we conducted elections in the Patriarchy....

The appointment and the ordination took place and we did all the necessary actions in order for me to assume this post. Why you did not ask me about all this?

Q: I will ask you later, I have many questions and I arranged my questions according to importance for the readers, thus the issue of the premises and disposing of the orthodox estates is the one which has angered the people in Jerusalem and the Palestinian people,

due to the sensitivity of these premises and their critical location inside the old town of Jerusalem, but you did not answer my question?

- No. Don't ask me too many questions. Do you understand?

Then Patriarch Theopholus stood up in a very nervous manner and started to search for an excuse to end the interview and he said: Yes, but before that, you should think, but you do not, and that is the problem.

Q: I can not allow you to talk to me in such a manner, Your eminence is a clergyman and I am in the premises of the Patriarchy which I respect and I have the right to obtain an answer or otherwise to decline the interview, but you have no right to attack me in such a way....

Theopholus: O.K., O.K., I want you to understand that the Palestinian president (Abu Mazen), has knowledge of what happened, and he did not pose to me any silly questions and King Abdullah did not ask me silly questions, because they are aware of what happened.

Q: Is my question about the destiny of the most important property in the old town and the loss of most of the Orthodox estates in Jerusalem a silly question according to your point of view?

Q: However, Abu Mazen and the Jordanian governments have set many conditions to support your appointment to this sensitive post as a Patriarch for the holy land, including seeking to revoke the dubious transactions that took place in the past, which can be recovered through legal ways? The National Authority and the Jordanian government expressed their worry about your behavior in many situations concerning the orthodox premises and estates?.

A: No, they recognized me fully. They know what happened because they are serious people.

Q: But there is the Palestinian governmental investigation committee and the reports from the Jordanian government in which it expresses its worry...?

A: Yes, But the King and Abu Mazen told me that they know about the pressures which are exercised on me.

Q: What is the role you played in deposing Irenius and what is your relation to...He did not allow me to complete the question and he interrupted me and said: Please tell me why is Irenius here in the Patriarchy, yes, for 24 hour per day. Why? Can you tell me why? Do you see. You did not think. This is the problem.

Q: Your Eminence, it seems that you do not want to answer my questions, therefore you attack me personally as a journalist who seeks the truth, what is going on in the Orthodox Patriarchy and for whose interest?

A: I do not understand your logic. I am not stupid. You say Abu Mazen and the Jordanian government, yes, yes of course. They know what happened. They did not send any person to me because they know what happened here. But all the rest are seeking their own self interests. I said that before. You want to continue? Don't you understand? Theopholus asked: tell me where do you live?

- I live in Jerusalem.

Theopholus: Ah, not in Africa?!

Q: Let us continue, you said that you do not have any powers to work on the revocation of the transaction in Bab Al-Khalil, but as soon as you were appointed in your post you practiced your powers and cancelled a judicial suit filed since the time of the predecessor, Patriarch Theodores, the petition of Kafr Samee'. Also, you withdraw and cancel the

judicial suit in a recent session, concerning Shema's land near Bab Al-Khalil? Is not this a contradiction. You are able to cancel transactions and petitions and at the same time you say you are unable to cancel Bab Al-Khalil transaction? How?..

A: What are you saying? Think then come to discuss such trivial issues that we do not care about. There is nothing like that at all. You missed this information. You do not build your questions on this information. This is not good for you. Yes. For your credibility.

It seemed that the patriarch forgot that since the beginning of the interview, he said that he can not file a petition to revoke Bab Al-Khalil transaction, then he answered saying: We stand against the Israeli government. We filed a petition against the government. What more do you want from us?

Q: Have you filed a law suit?

A: Yes, and the court session was held last March 17. You see, you do not follow the events. You are a journalist and you must know such thing.

“Al-Quds”: If you do not tell me, how can I know?

A: You can ask our lawyers, Renato Barak and Rami Al-Maghrabi.

It is true that the Patriarch submitted to the High Court a judicial petition in which he claimed for recognition, but it was mentioned in it that the judicial petition that was filed by the previous Patriarch Irenius the first about the issue of the premises is illegal petition because he is no longer a patriarch and today I am the legal Patriarch without claiming for revoking the transaction. The subject of this petition is not concerned with the transactions and the premises, but claiming recognition by Israel. Articles 31 and 36: 31 state that “This petition is not concerned with considering such transactions nor the investigation of their legality” and in article 36 “The previous Patriarch Irenius the first pretended that he did not know anything about this transaction and that he was deceived by Papademos and persons of Aterit Kohenim association. He expressed his position in a suit he submitted while he was not entitled for that he lacked authority in this regard).

Text attached (31+36)

Q: I have read the judicial petition that you filed and you mentioned in your book that you were exposed to blackmail. What is the kind of this blackmail? And who are the people who blackmail you?

A: Yes, they blackmail me.

Q: Who?

A: A lot of people, persons who have self interests and they can not confront me and this is the problem. They can not deal with me.

Q: Persons or government?

A: No, persons, persons.

Q: Persons who are linked to entities?

A: Of course, they can not reach me and this is the problem. Because they have high interests. They come for the sake of money. And for the sake of other things. I do not accept that.. I clarified to everyone that the situation is unbearable. The Patriarchy cannot be dealt with like a real-estate agency. I do not accept the continuation of the previous situation. I served the church here and abroad, in Qatar, Britain, Russia, Greece and here and I know all these matters.

Q: Are these pressures still present?

A: There is a lot of pressure. Yes. Because I am not the kind of person who serves their interests, whatever these interests are. I know them very well. I know them better than

they thought. Moreover, I know what is hidden behind their actions, behavior and otherwise. They do respect the Patriarchy nor their community here. They are against the presence of the community here, especially their community.

Q: In respect of the Palestinian-Jordanian joint council, did you participate in any procedures to activate this council?

A: Well, this is not our problem, we held meetings in Jordan and we are going on in this. It is a matter of time. Of course.

Q: Are you working for preparation for this council?

A: Yes, of course... and there was a meeting held for the members of the community.

Q: I have offered you the names of some persons for the joint council, like Ra'ouf Abu Jaber, Fouad Naeem, Fouad Farah and others such as...???

A: No, no, not yet. We have to perform elections.. First in Jordan. Elections should be performed.

Q: What about the names nominated in Palestine?

A: No, until now I do not know. The people here are ready for this.

Q: Did you contact the new Palestinian government?..

A: I have attended the inauguration of the Palestinian Legislative Council.

Q: A meeting was supposed to be held between you and the government in order to inform them about what is happening in the Patriarchy and to discuss the issues and the problems that the Patriarchy is suffering from.

A: I have no knowledge about that... No. We have good relations with "Abu Mazen".

Q: Some news were heard about a new transaction with the Israeli Institution (Hadassah) and "JVC", regarding renting of the Orthodox endowment estate land near the of Al-Thawry railway station, what are the facts of this transaction?.

- No, not yet. We are on our way to conclude this transaction.

Q: This means that the issue is correct and that there are negotiations regarding this land?

A: Yes we are engaged in negotiations. No, no. We have not engaged yet. These matters are related to the Synod. We discuss these issues in the Synod.

Q: We understand that it may be rented to Israelis for a long period of time without reservations from your side, being the Patriarch of the holy city?

A: No, these matters... I mean first.. then you come after that to see what happened. We can not do anything before we start, we shall know what is going on..

Here it is worthy mentioning that the transaction and the process of renting the Patriarchy lands with an area of about 8 Donems was already rented to Israeli companies and institutions only weeks before and they are located at the most beautiful places in Jerusalem overlooking two main streets on the road between Jerusalem and Bethlehem, near the train station.

Q: You said in our conversation that Rami Al-Maghrabi and Renato Barak are the two lawyers of the Patriarchy? What about Lawyer Gel' ad Sher? Is he still the lawyer of the Patriarchy?

A: He was about to visit us some time ago, but after that a problem happened concerning the documents and proofs, beside the story of One and a half million Dollars, that is related to Al-Thawry issue, but this one disappeared. It was decided that Gelaad Sheer will come and meet us here in the Patriarchy but he disappeared and did not appear again.

Q: That means that you did not meet Lawyer Gel'ad Sher since your appointment in this post?

A: Yes, he cancelled his meeting with me.

Q: What about Abu Tour issue that the Patriarchy lost and is paying compensation for?

A: We paid 4 million Dollars and we will pay another ten millions on installments.

Q: You, the Patriarchy or the Greek Consulate? I saw cheques issued by the Greek Consulate related to this case, and what is the relation between the Greek Consulate and this subject?

A: This is a stupid and incorrect statement.

Q: I saw cheques issued by the Greek Consulate related to the case and a copy of this cheque that we kept with "Al-Quds".

A: Who said that? I am so sorry if you have information like that, this is your problem. I do not know the relation of the Greek government with this.

Q: You did not answer my question, what is the relation of the Greek government to pay on your behalf these money?

A: There is no relation with this. Ask the Greek Consul. How would you write such things? From where did you get this information, if you are serious journalist. Do you write all what is said to you?

Q: Is there any more transactions that are expected apart from the land in Al-Thawry east of the train station? How can you follow up the issues of the Patriarchy properties, lands and premises, like the issue of Rahafia, Knesset, Bet Shimesh and other land lots and premises which are scattered in East and West Jerusalem?

A: We are considering all these issues and we are waiting to see the results.

Q: What are you waiting for and what does this situation mean exactly???

A; We are keen on our premises and worried about them. What happened was enough.

Q: You mean that you will oppose all these transactions?

A: We have to study all these issues and take care of the interests of the Patriarchy because some people look at it now as a real-estate agency.

Q: What about the issues of forgery cases that were discovered in the Patriarchy? Who are the people involved? Are they going to be punished?

A: This did not take place in my time. It took place at the time of Thodorous and others.

Q: Did the Saint George issue happen at the time of Theodorous?... And what about other issues?

A: What do you want from me?

Q: Did you investigate to know who is responsible in order to be sure that it won't happen again?

A: This is not my business, go and ask Theodorus and Irenius ?

Q: But Theodorus is dead, and you are now in charge. What did you do?

A: I told you that we studied all these things and we devoted special care to the interest of the Patriarchy and its properties....

Q: There is talk about a transaction in Akka city in an important location with an area 20 Donems, a land lot called "Mesabik", what stage did this transaction reach?

A: I do not know anything about that, But we have some properties there and people are trying to exploit them. That's right. But we will not dispose of them. Most people consider the Patriarchy not as a spiritual relic but as a real-estate agency. Do you understand? Everyone is seeking the premises and they do not care about the Patriarchy.

Q: You said that Israeli lawyer Gel'ad Sher has disappeared. He never came. Did you ask him to provide a list of cases that he was handling? Did you check the status of such cases? Did you cancel the proxy that he had as the lawyer of the Patriarchy?

A: What do you want us to do. First we did not obtain the details. You ask for strange things, please be serious.

Q: Are these unserious questions?

A: I do not understand your logic, with all respect, please be clear.

Q: Are there any records in the Patriarchy for its properties in Palestine as a whole, in Israel and in Jordan? Do you have records for these properties?

A: There were some properties but perhaps we do not know about them. But most of our properties are registered. I mean that most of them are recorded and documented.

Q: What is the number of the premises that have problems and cases which were submitted to the Israeli courts?

A: I think that you only care about the properties and nothing else. This is how you look at the Patriarchy; this is what people think of the Patriarchy. They do not look at it as an institution.

Q: We look at it as an institution, I Asked you about the joint council, but you did not answer, I asked you about the members and you did not answer, and I asked you about the position of the premises and you did not answer as well. What do you want me to ask you about?

A: We have history here. You as Muslims, when did you come to these lands? In the seventh century, who were before you??? It was the church.... Yes, it was the church. The patriarchy was present here,. From where did you come to these countries?

-: We are the native people of the country, but this is not the core of the subject of this interview.

A: The origin of the country is the Patriarchy here. You think that you came before the Patriarchy, right. You did not ask about the meaning of the Patriarchy and about its importance. You do not care about this matter.

Q: We know that the role of the Patriarchy is to preserve its properties and estates from being lost and from disposal to those who are working to remove the native people of the country from their homes and their lands?.

A: But serious people like Abu Mazen, Yasser Arafat, and King Abdullah know what the Patriarchy is, do you understand? You speak only about the properties and nothing else; you do not care about the spiritual task of the Patriarchy and its ethical, cultural and historical task.

His voice became louder and he started shouting and then he stood up and said: Who are those? Who are you? Everyone comes here searching for that. It is true that you were here since the Seventh century, but the Patriarchy has been here before everyone else. Do you understand? Do not look to the Patriarchy in terms of properties. This is not in your interest.

Q: It is known that the problem which stirred controversy in Jerusalem was the great number of transaction to dispose of property, especially in the old town to Jewish Settlement associations, therefore we focus on the premises and properties?

A: What is the problem, the Christians and Muslims think of the Patriarchy as property only. That is enough. It is a holy institution; you do not respect the Patriarchy. Do you know what is going on in the Patriarchy? Jerusalem means the Patriarchy and the Patriarchy means Jerusalem.

Q: What is the meaning of Jerusalem if it is turned over to Jews and its properties are turned over to settlement associations?

A: You are the ones who are giving them, not me. You give them. This interview is over.

Q: No, it is not over yet, I still have a lot of important questions?

A: No, it is over, I gave you a lot. Please, that is enough.

Q: It seemed from the beginning that you did not want to answer my questions.

A: No, please. In this matter, go to our lawyers and they will give you all what you want.

Q: We do not want to meet the lawyers; we want to complete our interview?

A: Sorry, I am very busy.

Q: Who appointed you as an archbishop and included you in the Synod? We know that the procedures. It takes place either through nomination by an important governmental figure or through the Patriarch?

- No. No... there is an election.

Q: But who consecrate you as an archbishop, is it not Irenius the first?

-No, I am here since the time of Theodoros. Irenius consecrated me as an archbishop. I did not ask him to do that. Ask him...

Q: You were part of the Synod and part of the Patriarchy in which all these issues occurred, what was your situation and what will you do to stop that?

A: Theodoros the Patriarch is the one who included me in the Synod. During the time of Theodorus, he nominated me to be Archbishop.

Q: Why don't you answer the remaining questions, in order to complete the interview and to remove ambiguity from many issues that the citizens think of?

-Please, I ask you to do me a favor and to write the questions.

The Patriarch ended the interview by offering me some sweets and presented to me some old photographs hanging on the wall in the hall, and he said: The Patriarchy is the basis. King Hussein was here before the 1967 war. He also pointed to a photo of Chairman Abu Ammar.

He added: The intellectual persons like Abu Mazen know the meaning of the Patriarchy, and what does The Roman Orthodox Patriarch means.

Elias Awad (From Gaza), Assistant of the Patriarch commented by saying: Journalists like to dig for facts.

Patriarch Theopholus: I did not get angry with anyone. Everyone does his job. He gives attention to his clients. Correct? The Journalists do their job correctly, isn't that true?

After this interview, which was characterized by provocation, doubt, personal assault, inaccuracy of information, evading the answers and contradiction in some answers in which Patriarch Theopholus the first refused to answer our questions, it seemed that things in the Orthodox Patriarchy are moving in a way contrary to the wishes of the community members and the Palestinian people, in view of the sensitivity of the position of this patriarchy which owns large areas of lands in East and West Jerusalem, which are the target of a lot of settlement associations and institutions, in the throng of a hidden war on the Arab and Palestinian existence and identity of the holy city.