

# ***Izbet Bushra:***

***Recording the Sources and Suggesting Reconciliation Following a  
Conflict over Church Building***

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## Table of Contents

I. Introduction .....	p. 3
II. Methodology .....	p. 3
III. The Demographics of Izbet Bushra .....	p. 4
A. Population	
B. Houses of Worship	
IV. Timeline .....	p. 6
A. Considering a Church	
B. Ecclesiastical Transformation and Early Tensions	
C. June 21, 2009	
D. Arrests, Injuries, and Accusations	
E. Protest and Reconciliation	
F. Area Developments	
V. Current State of Relations .....	p. 12
A. Deteriorating?	
B. Christian Disagreement?	
C. Returning to Normal?	
VI. Best Effort at Synthesis .....	p. 14
VII. Suggestions for Reconciliation .....	p. 17
A. For the Muslims	
B. For the Christians	
C. For the Mediator	
D. For a Project	
VIII. Conclusion .....	p. 20
A. Identifying Fault	
B. How to Build a Church	
C. Passing a Unified Law for Building Houses of Worship	

## ***Introduction***

On June 21, 2009 violent conflict broke out between Muslims, Christians, and security forces of Izbet Bushra, a small village located in the governorate of Beni Suef, approximately 120 kilometers south of Cairo. The issue at hand was Coptic prayer services being conducted in a private home, which caused offense to Muslim neighbors, who constitute approximately 60% of village population. Damage was done to the building as well as to other Christian homes, and people from both sides were injured in the altercation. Security arrested many and imposed curfew, after which Christians conducted a sit-in protest at the cathedral in el-Fashn, the location of the bishopric to which Izbet Bushra belongs. This was followed shortly thereafter by reconciliation session between all sides, which freed all perpetrators from custody and produced an oral agreement to compensate afflicted parties and authorize an official church in a different location in the village. Until today that promise has not been kept; security relates that sufficient tension has not yet been removed from the village.

These lines may represent a summarized timeline of the events following June 21, but they hardly represent the entire story. This paper explores the issue of Izbet Bushra in depth, seeking to discover the larger context behind the incident as provide integration of as many facts and testimonies as could be collected. This has been done through access to the many media reports published about village, as well as through investigative research undertaken by the Arab West Report team or by others commissioned on our behalf. The result is a thorough collection of data that rounds out the story, providing depth and color.

Unfortunately, a wealth of data also produces confusion. Testimony from the two sides is contradictory, as are the news reports which depended on these oppositional sources. Yet background can be provided in stating that the house used for public prayer services was not an innocent effort to conduct Christian worship. While it is true that no formal church building exists in Izbet Bushra, and that the procedures for obtaining permission to construct a church are burdensome and lack transparency, the Christians of the village purposely deceived both government administration and Muslim neighbors in declaring the building in question to be built as a factory. Upon its completion it was then first made into a residence for the priest and then employed in its lower hall for church services. While this fact makes more understandable the Muslim reactions, details even here and in the attack which followed remain unclear.

This paper first arranges all testimony, no matter how contradictory, into a narrative flow in order to give a timeline of events. It then records a best attempt at synthesis in order to distinguish from fact and speculation, offering a faithful and unbiased effort to understand exactly what took place. This recording is not done for its own sake, however, as our interest in Izbet Bushra lies ultimately in social reconciliation between the two parties. In this hope the paper concludes with suggestions for each religious community in order to seek for a solution to restore village harmony. These proposals are offered humbly, and we await the right opportunity in which we might engage village leaders to encourage them toward dialogue and reconciliation.

## ***Methodology***

Data for this report was collected from several sources. Systematic attention was paid to the Egyptian press coverage about Izbet Bushra, of which articles were collected from seven different newspapers.

These are listed below, with a description of their political or social leanings. In addition several site visits were undertaken, two by an investigative reporter on June 23 and June 26, and four by our own Arab West Report team, on July 21, September 2, October 12, and January 5, 2010. The two trips taken by the investigative reporter were to the village itself. The first two trips of the AWR team visited Christian religious figures in the nearby centers of Beba and el-Fashn, and the third visit was to an NGO in Beni Suef. It was not until the fourth attempt our team was able to visit the village directly. Phone calls to the village had been arranged, however, the first one to Fr. Kastour of Izbet Bushra, on September 3, and the second to his replacement, Fr. Yacoub, on January 26, 2010. Finally, data was collected from a questionnaire distributed among the priests of Beba and el-Fashn, which was arranged during the second AWR trip to visit Christian religious leaders. Sources of all information are recorded in the endnotes.

Newspaper	Linkages	Published
al-Arabi	Opposition – Nasserist Party	Weekly
al-Dustur	Independent	Daily
al-Hayat	Saudi-funded, London-published, Distributed in Egypt	Daily
Al-Jumhuria	Semi-governmental	Daily
al-Masri al-Youm	Independent	Daily
Sawt al-Umma	Independent	Weekly
al-Wafd	Opposition – Wafd Party	Daily
Watani International	Christian	Weekly

### ***The Demographics of Izbet Bushra***

#### *Population*

Izbet Bushra is located in the governorate of Beni Suef, whose capital city, Beni Suef, is about one and one half hours south of Cairo by car. There are 2.3 million people living in the governorate,<sup>i</sup> which also contains the cities of el-Fashn, with a population of 27,000,<sup>ii</sup> and Beba, with a smaller population but a higher standard of living due to the presence of jewelers, merchants, and the educated elite of the area.<sup>iii</sup> These two cities and their surrounding villages comprise the Bishopric of Beba and el-Fashn, presided over by Bishop Stephanos. There are 57,000 Christians living in the bishopric, mostly employed in simple labor such as agriculture.<sup>iv</sup>

Izbet Bushra is located to the northwest of el-Fashn,<sup>v</sup> and is actually one of three villages by this name.<sup>vi</sup> It is properly known as East Izbet Bushra, which lies about 10-15 kilometers from West Izbet Bushra,<sup>vii</sup> which contains 7,500 villagers,<sup>viii</sup> and nearby Izbet Bushra al-Bahriya.<sup>ix</sup> East Izbet Bushra is a somewhat isolated village; it lies three kilometers off the main road which connects to West Izbet Bushra.<sup>x</sup> In addition East Izbet Bushra is about 20 kilometers from Izbet Girgis.<sup>xi</sup>

The Izbet Bushras, it is reported, are named after Bushra Hanna Bey, a wealthy Christian who owned a vast estate,<sup>xii</sup> and purchased his title from the dynasty of Muhammad Ali for a sum of 5,000 to 10,000 pounds. This, in addition to his title, afforded him recognition by the government as well as access to the throne.<sup>xiii</sup> Bushra Pasha was well-loved by area villagers, as he would help their sons, both Muslim and Christian, escape from military service by paying a sum of money on their behalf.<sup>xiv</sup>

East Izbet Bushra, which will hereafter be referred to simply as Izbet Bushra, is a small territory comprising only five feddans.<sup>xv</sup> Its population, however, is difficult to gauge. Testimony from the Christian villagers<sup>xvi</sup> estimates that there are no more than 170 families, dividing this number (improperly) into 75 Muslim families and 65 Christian families.<sup>xvii</sup> They comment also that each Christian family has between eight and ten individuals, sometimes comprising up to four related families in one house.<sup>xviii</sup> Bishop Stephanos roughly agrees with the distribution, echoing that there are 65 Christian families in Izbet Bushra, representing 50% of the total population.<sup>xix</sup> An article from Sawt al-Umma, however, reckons the population to be much smaller, though of similar distribution, stating there are a total of 70 families, 30 of which are Christian.<sup>xx</sup>

When the population is estimated per individual there is even more discrepancy. Sources from within the bishopric declare a total population of 2,500 people, 1,000 of whom are Christians,<sup>xxi</sup> and Watani International establishes a higher figure and even distribution, 3,000 individuals and 1,500 Christians.<sup>xxii</sup> Village Muslims, however, report a total population of 3,200 people, only 420 of whom are Christian.<sup>xxiii</sup> Our investigative reporter,<sup>xxiv</sup> who secured this statistic, states himself that there are 2,270 people in Izbet Bushra, and of them only 400 Christians.<sup>xxv</sup> Our visit to the village revealed two estimates, of 250 Christians by Hanna Shaker, a Copt, and of 500 Christians by Masry Abd al-Mawla, a Muslim.<sup>xxvi</sup> Meanwhile, al-Hayat confirms these estimates but believes the total and distribution to be more extreme, 4,000 individuals and 200 Christians.<sup>xxvii</sup>

A few local priests also gave their estimation of the population of Izbet Bushra. Fr. Armiya Makram Shafiq believes there are 80 Christian families and 70 Muslim families, while Fr. Hananiya Mikhail Girgis reverses the numbers. Both priests claim to have visited Izbet Bushra; this was two years ago for Fr. Shafiq, while Fr. Girgis does not indicate when. Meanwhile, two other priests believe the Muslim population is substantially larger. Fr. Hatour Bushra Mina estimates there are 80 Christian families to 160 Muslim families, while Fr. Abra'am Wanis Atallah thinks there are 50 Christian families compared to 700 Muslim families. While Fr. Mina last visited Izbet Bushra in 2008, Fr. Atallah has never been. Fr. Saman Shihata Rizq Allah, who visited shortly after the June incidents, does not comment on the Christian population but places the total number of Muslims at 500.<sup>xxviii</sup>

The population estimates are assembled in the table below:

Population Estimates for Izbet Bushra					
By Families			By Population		
Source	Muslim	Christian	Source	Muslim	Christian
Christian Villagers	75	65	Bishopric	1,500	1,000
Bishop Stephanos		65	Watani International	1,500	1,500
Sawt al-Umma	40	30	Village Muslims	2,780	420
Father Shafiq	70	80	Investigative Reporter	1,870	400
Father Girgis	80	70	al-Hayat	3,800	200
Father Mina	160	80	Father Rizq Allah	500	
Father Atallah	700	50	Hanna Shaker		250
			Masry Abd al-Mawla		500

## *Houses of Worship*

Another difficult area to ascertain is the number of houses of worship in Izbet Bushra. All reports agree that there are two mosques,<sup>xxix</sup> the first being built 15 years ago,<sup>xxx</sup> but the second mosque is newer and figures prominently in the story of the incidents. Concerning the number of churches, however, the reports are divided. Bishop Stephanos declared that Izbet Bushra has two buildings for worship, but that they only accommodate one-third of the Christian population.<sup>xxxi</sup> It seems this indicates the building in question, attacked on June 21, represents a third building, but this is not clear. Bishop Stephanos indicated both buildings had “an agreement” in the local village,<sup>xxxii</sup> which does not seem to be true of the building in question.

Local Christian villagers, however, say that there is only one building used for worship in Izbet Bushra, but deny that this building was used for prayers.<sup>xxxiii</sup> They state that there is no church in the village, and that the nearest one is 15-20 kilometers away, requiring a 40 LE round trip taxi fare.<sup>xxxiv</sup> While local Muslim villagers assert that prayers were conducted, they agree that there is no church in Izbet Bushra, and that Christians of the village used to pray in a nearby village.<sup>xxxv</sup> Masry Abd al-Mawla states, however, that this church is only one kilometer distance from Izbet Bushra.<sup>xxxvi</sup> Fr. Kastour provides the same estimate as that of Christian villagers, describing a church in West Izbet Bushra, 10-15 kilometers away.<sup>xxxvii</sup>

At least by comparison, details about the building in question are roundly similar. A report in al-Dustur calls the building the Church of St. George and St. Abanub, composed of two floors, with the third floor serving as the residence of the priest.<sup>xxxviii</sup> The bishop described the church as also having a basement, with the ground floor serving as a prayer hall, the next floor as a general utility hall, and private apartments for the priest and his family on the top floor.<sup>xxxix</sup> Local Muslims describe the building as having an open ground floor, pillars in the second, and the priest’s residence in the third.<sup>xl</sup> Fr. Hananiya declares the building to be 110 m<sup>2</sup>, with the hall on the ground floor and the church on the second, while Fr. Sim’an states it to be 70 m<sup>2</sup>.<sup>xli</sup>

Considering how the church came to be, however, as well as how it came to be used as a place of prayer, is another matter altogether. Examination of this history will lead into the events of June 21, when sectarian clashes developed anew in Izbet Bushra.

## ***Timeline***

### *Considering a Church*

The original situation for Christian worship in Izbet Bushra appears to be minimal. While Muslims have had a mosque in the village for the past fifteen years, the only proper church structure for Christians was in West Izbet Bushra, 10-15 kilometers away, though there is dispute about the distance. The village was serviced, however, by visitation from a local priest, who would conduct prayers and Christian education in homes.<sup>xlii</sup> Fr. Shafiq confirms this about Izbet Bushra.<sup>xliii</sup> This service was for individual families, but also had a communal aspect. Fr. Abd al-Masih speaks of area villages in general but also of Izbet Bushra in particular, stating that the church had a small room established in which people could pray, though he added this was often too small to accommodate the village needs.<sup>xliiv</sup> Masry Abd al-Mawla states that prayers used to be conducted in the homes of three Christian villagers, Adly Sadek Moawad, Mikhail Tawdros, and Ayyad Abdul Malik.<sup>xliv</sup> It could be that the use of such rooms

or homes could coincide with the bishop's report of two places of worship in Izbet Bushra. Since the priest would have to arrive and then leave each day, but had many families to visit, the villagers began considering if they could arrange a place for him and his family to reside in the village, since he needed rest, and transportation was far away.<sup>xlvi</sup>

The idea to create a place of residence for the priest seems to have developed in 2006, when the three floor building was first commissioned and then completed toward the end of the year.<sup>xlvii</sup> This is perhaps contradicted by the findings of our investigative reporter, however, who, depending on Muslim sources, states that the building was not completed and useable until the end of 2008.<sup>xlviii</sup> Perhaps this detail can be accommodated in the story which follows.

It appears the building was constructed by a certain Mr. Tadrouss, a local Christian villager, and that even before the priest came to live there it would serve as a place of prayers as described above.<sup>xlix</sup> Authorization to build, however, was obtained on the basis of the building becoming a factory. According to Fr. Ishaq Kastour, the priest serving Izbet Bushra for whom the building was designed, this was done because of the impossibility of obtaining a permit to build a church. This language indicates that the building was intended as a church from the very beginning, not just as a place of rest and residence for the priest, in addition to use as an administrative center. Though he states this circumvention of the law was aimed at security, and that he didn't believe local Muslims would mind a church being built, the story was repeated to them, and he was fearful if they knew the truth there could be clashes.<sup>l</sup>

The Christians were careful to choose a site far away from the village mosque,<sup>li</sup> but Muslims assisted in building what they believed was to be a factory.<sup>lii</sup> By the time the building was completed near the close of 2006 there were already rumors and concerns from both Muslims and some Christians that the building was to be transformed into a church.<sup>liii</sup> Whether or not prayers were conducted during that time is not clear from our sources; as stated above it appears that they may have been, though in the small scale manner of home visitation as elsewhere in the village.

#### *Ecclesiastical Transformation and Early Tensions*

It was not until July of 2008, however, that the bishopric purchased the building from Mr. Tadrouss, at which time the priest's belongings were transferred there.<sup>liv</sup> According to local Muslims this took place exactly on the 11<sup>th</sup> of July.<sup>lv</sup> As Muslims took note of the proceedings, local Christians were delighted, especially as renovations to the building began which would indeed transform it into a church.<sup>lvi</sup> These renovations, however, prompted local Muslims into their own building activity. Fr. Abd al-Masih expressed surprise that at the time of purchase they discovered Muslims to be building a mosque right in front of the building, which he suspected was done to prevent its ecclesiastical transformation.<sup>lvii</sup> This new mosque was a mere 50 meters from the three floor building,<sup>lviii</sup> and according to Christian sources was built with donations from Cairo.<sup>lix</sup> Around this time, perhaps in early August, Bishop Stephanus officially dedicated the building for church services, and in addition purchased a plot of land 124 m<sup>2</sup> adjacent to the building, as reported in *Sawt al-Umma*, due to the small scale sectarian incidents it ignited, noticed even by the Wafd party, which sought to warn the local government.<sup>lx</sup> As would be seen, the warning did not prevent further escalation.

For the incidents to be described following the church's purchase of land, Watani International included Izbet Bushra in a list of locations embroiled in sectarian conflict during 2008.<sup>lxi</sup> Three days after the priest arrived the stone wall surrounding the building was damaged, and local Christians accused the

security forces of encouraging the Muslim villagers in this action.<sup>lxii</sup> Furthermore, they accused Muslims of uprooting their plants and burning down their houses, noting also the counter-accusation of Muslims that the Christians did this themselves.<sup>lxiii</sup> It is noteworthy, however, that our investigative reporter doubts that the stone wall was broken at all, stating the Muslims had no idea at the time that the building was also to be a church, and why would anyone break down the walls of a home?<sup>lxiv</sup> After this incident, however, the church filed official papers, but life went on.<sup>lxv</sup>

Following the incidents in 2008 local Muslims report that the small security contingent was increased in size.<sup>lxvi</sup> There are reports of another outbreak of violence, however, in early 2009. The report claims damage to the fence surrounding the property and the surrounding agricultural land,<sup>lxvii</sup> but the incident is so similar to that of 2008 that it is worth questioning if they are the same event and our sources are confused. Nevertheless, an al-Hayat report concerning the most recent incident from June 21, 2009 quotes Muslim villagers who stated that similar clashes took place last year for the same reason, i.e. prayers in a private home.<sup>lxviii</sup> The claim of last year suggests 2008, but the same reason suggests it could have been the continued prayers conducted in the building in 2009, for the 2008 violence appears to have erupted because the priest took residency following the building's dedication as a church (it is not reported if this ceremony was public).

In any case, following the incidents reports were filed with the local authorities, though the Christians complain they were filed as 'administrative' matters, which they devalued believing such a category to be followed up only rarely.<sup>lxix</sup> Still, Fr. Kastour maintains that the filed papers were helpful, for the security promised at that time to give official permission to open the building as a church, but that he himself should 'take a vacation' while they finished procedures.<sup>lxx</sup> The nature of this vacation is disputed. Fr. Kastour says the security asked the bishop to give him a vacation,<sup>lxxi</sup> while local Christians of Izbet Bushra blame the bishop for 'allowing' the priest to leave the village.<sup>lxxii</sup> Our investigative reporter, however, states that the bishop sent Fr. Kastour away from the village as a sort of exile to a monastery.<sup>lxxiii</sup>

Fr. Kastour reports that he was away from Izbet Bushra for one and a half months, at which time the security asked him to return. They stipulated, however, that his return was provisional on the building being used only as a residence, and not as a place for prayer or other religious activity.<sup>lxxiv</sup> Without any report on whether or not he accepted these terms, he did return, and found the building under guard of security, ostensibly for its protection. Fr. Abd al-Qudus Henna reports, though, that they allowed only the priest's relatives to enter the building, preventing any Christian gatherings or worship.<sup>lxxv</sup> Fr. Kastour relates that over the next few months he went to security 24 times to pursue the promised permission for the building, but made no progress.<sup>lxxvi</sup>

### *June 21, 2009*

The pursuit of official permission leads directly into the events of June 21, 2009, which sparked the most recent sectarian conflict in Izbet Bushra. Fr. Kastour states that on that day he received some young men from Cairo, though related to the village, who wanted to inquire about the registration procedures. Security tried to prevent them from visiting him, but eventually allowed them to go up to meet him two-by-two, but all eventually arrived upstairs. During this time he alleged that security began stirring up trouble in the streets and at the doors of Muslim houses, rousing them to a perceived threat. At that time, the two sides began throwing rocks at one another.<sup>lxxvii</sup> Testimony from the bishopric asserts also that the gathered Muslim mob forcibly entered the building and sacked the church from inside.<sup>lxxviii</sup>

Aspects of Fr. Kastour's report are apparently confirmed from other sources. Al-Dustur reports in detail that six young men visited the priest at his residence and encountered resistance from security. They add a small detail that seems odd, however, in that they were prevented from entering the village in the first place, and found the gathered Muslims waiting for them as they were leaving the village.<sup>lxxxix</sup> Al-Arabi also reports that visitors were obstructed from accessing the priest's house, though it labels those accosting them as villagers, not security, and states they were prevented from performing Christian rites. It adds also the important detail that the previous day Fr. Kastour invited 50 families to celebrate mass in the building. The article also confirms that the two sides threw stones and bricks at each other.<sup>lxxx</sup>

Watani International confirms the detail that the incident was prompted following rumors of prayers being conducted in the building. It also provides more details on the ransacking of the house and the aftermath, stating that the gathered Muslims smashed the building's windows and attacked Christian villagers with clubs and knives.<sup>lxxxix</sup> Christian villagers testify that the security prevented people from seeing the priest on several occasions, and blame one security officer in particular for escalating the incident of June 21, though they do not know his name.<sup>lxxxii</sup> Fr. Abd al-Qudus Henna, however, identifies the officer as Sharif Sa'id, adding also his deputy Samir Abd al-Aziz, whom he is prepared to denounce to their face.<sup>lxxxiii</sup>

Village Muslims give a different account of the events, though they follow a similar timeline. Ahmed Salim, imam of the mosque in Izbet Bushra and elder sheikh of its largest family, states Muslims noticed a group of villagers from outside Izbet Bushra (from Cairo or el-Fashn) gathered at the house of the priest, with some staying outside. He then instructed people after prayers to investigate what was happening,<sup>lxxxiv</sup> at which point the Muslims testify they found security arguing with Christians in the street. Masry Abd al-Mawla agreed with the odd arrival of visitors from Cairo as it was not a holiday, but mentioned the incident began when mothers of fighting children began arguing in the street, and were soon joined by male relatives.<sup>lxxxv</sup> Security told the Muslims that they had come to stop the unrest, but Muslims asserted that there was none. During this time they claim that the Christians, led by the priest, went up to the roof of the building and began throwing stones at security. They claim that the entire incident was a pre-arranged plan by Fr. Kastour to stir up evil in the village.<sup>lxxxvi</sup>

During the exchange of stone throwing it is also reported by Fr. Kastour that his car was damaged,<sup>lxxxvii</sup> a charge repeated by Muhammad, the son of Sheikh Ahmed Salem, concerning his Peugeot 504.<sup>lxxxviii</sup> A greater security contingent arrived on the scene after only ten minutes,<sup>lxxxix</sup> as they had been gathered nearby at the mosque to prevent possible Muslim demonstrations against US policy in Iraq or Palestine, for example, which he claims is common in Egypt.<sup>xc</sup> The size of the reported security force is quite large; two central police divisions numbering 100 soldiers apiece.<sup>xc</sup> They settled the situation and Watani International reports they imposed a curfew,<sup>xcii</sup> which al-Arabi reports lasted 48 hours.<sup>xciii</sup> They also arrested several individuals, though the numbers vary.

### *Arrests, Injuries, and Accusations*

Fr. Kastour reports that security arrested 19 Christians,<sup>xciv</sup> a figure which is repeated by Watani International.<sup>xcv</sup> Al-Hayat reports the arrest of 12 Christians and 20 Muslims,<sup>xcvi</sup> while al-Dustur reports the later release of 18 Christians and five Muslims who had been detained.<sup>xcvii</sup> Our investigative reporter notes that 14 Christians and 10 Muslims were arrested.<sup>xcviii</sup> Al-Arabi reports 27 people total without providing religious division.<sup>xcix</sup> Fr. Kastour also had an official police accusation against him for allegedly

harassing certain women, but these charges were later dropped.<sup>c</sup> The bishopric states that after a few days the 19 Christians arrested for starting the troubles appeared in court, at which time they were released.<sup>ci</sup>

There are also conflicting reports about the injuries suffered during the clashes. Watani International states that 25 Christians were injured,<sup>cii</sup> while al-Dustur reports 20 Christian injuries.<sup>ciii</sup> Al-Hayah reverses the numbers, however, reporting eight Muslims injuries to only one Christian injury.<sup>civ</sup> Tharwat William, lawyer for the bishopric, meanwhile, is reported by al-Dustur as claiming that the Christians released from custody had traces on their bodies indicating they had been tortured, relating also that some directly accused security of torture, yet denying Muslim villager involvement.<sup>cv</sup>

In the days which followed there were many follow-up accusations against security and the Muslim villagers. Following the Friday incidents the curfew held 48 hours, but al-Dustur reports that on Sunday Muslims broke the windows of Christian homes and destroyed the priest's car. Then on Monday they uprooted crops belonging to Christians and cut their electricity, phone, and internet connections. Ahmad Salem, however, states that crops of both Muslims and Christians were uprooted.<sup>cvi</sup> The article adds that security forces broke into many homes and committed many 'transgressions'.<sup>cvii</sup> Watani International repeats the charge of cut telephone and internet lines, but reports this was done by police, and does not state it was for Christian houses alone.<sup>cviii</sup> Al-Dustur also reports that security forces prevented journalists and representatives of human rights organizations from accessing the village. They carry the accusation of Fr. Yunan stating that Christians are enclosed in their homes, prevented from leaving, resulting in shortages of food and livestock feed.<sup>cix</sup> Meanwhile Fr. Abd al-Qudus Henna focuses on the isolation of the priest in this setting, claiming he is kept inside and denied access from the outside, causing suffering from food, electricity, water, and medication shortages.<sup>cx</sup>

Outside organizations also accuse security of wrongdoing. The Egyptian Union for Human Rights Organizations blames the security for not protecting Christians, laying responsibility also on the government for not passing a unified law on building houses of worship, as reported in al-Dustur.<sup>cxii</sup> An otherwise unidentified American organization, INA, is reported by al-Wafd as claiming that security protected Muslims who burned Christian homes and crops.<sup>cxiii</sup>

Christian villagers also leveled many accusations against security and local Muslims. They claim that since security entered the village they have stirred people against one another and burned houses and fields. They have broken into houses, under direct order, and destroyed items such as televisions and icons. One girl, they claim, suffered nervous shock, and another was beaten and thrown into the street. A boy, named Khalil, reportedly still bears on his body the marks from his beating. They also warn the original house owner (not identified) from accepting the invitation of security to help reconcile people, claiming that they only want to make an example of him to warn others not to sell property to the church. They also warn that he may be killed.<sup>cxiiii</sup>

Determining the truth between these accounts is difficult, even more so when the intentions of those involved are taken into consideration. In this regard it is interesting to note that certain Christian sources deny that prayers were conducted in the church. This is the testimony of Fr. Ruways Rizq, Deputy Metropolitan, according to an article in al-Dustur,<sup>cxv</sup> and is repeated by Christian villagers in Izbet Bushra.<sup>cxvi</sup> The reports to the contrary are listed above, and both Fr. Hananya Mikhail Girgis and Fr. Armiya Makram Shafiq indicate to some degree that the clashes erupted over prayer conducted in the building.<sup>cxvii</sup>

Meanwhile, there are sources noted above which indicate the general Muslim innocence concerning how the clash began. Our investigative reporter also supports this notion, believing the Muslims did not have any idea the building was a church before they investigated on June 21, and states they did not enter the building and wreck it.<sup>cxxvii</sup> His report, however, quotes Ahmed Salem by implication in regard to the incidents, who asks how can it be that a church is built in an Islamic country?<sup>cxxviii</sup> That the Muslims are resistant to the presence of a church in their village is also evidenced by their general question to the Christians: Why did you not build a church back when Bushra Bey controlled the village?<sup>cxxix</sup> Al-Masry al-Youm also quotes a Muslim villager who expresses active resistance to the idea of a church, vowing that no church will be built 'whatever it takes'. He blames the Christians for violating the law by failing to get a permit, but the author notes the villager himself flaunts the law by dealing in food subsidies and antiquity digging.<sup>cxx</sup>

### *Protest and Reconciliation*

The day after the incident Bishop Stephanos called for a sit-in protest at the Church of the Virgin in el-Fashn, demanding the release of the Christian detainees, as reported by Watani International.<sup>cxxi</sup> According to al-Arabi twenty clergymen and over 2,000 Christians responded and joined his protest,<sup>cxxii</sup> though Fr. Abadir Atiyah Shakir complains that security prevented the Christians of Izbet Bushra from joining them, presumably due to the curfew, though his testimony is confusing since he declares that eventually they allowed fifteen priests to join in the protest.<sup>cxxiii</sup> Al-Dustur, however, reports that dozens of Christians from Izbet Bushra attended the sit-in protest, but does not provide an overall number.<sup>cxxiv</sup>

Perhaps this protest pushed the sides toward a rapid reconciliation effort, for meetings were convened between local politicians, village leaders, and security administration less than a week later. Following a visit by parliament members to the hospital where victims were interned, Attorney General for Beni Suef Hamdi Faruq released all arrested parties, according to al-Arabi.<sup>cxxv</sup> A few days later there was a formal meeting to celebrate reconciliation. Those in attendance representing the state included Governor Ezzat Abdullah, governor of Beni Suef, General Azmi Bedawi, director of security, General Samir Abd al-Magid, inspector of security investigations, Sheikh Abdullah Shelbi from the Ministry of Religious Endowments, Officer Ibrahim al-Misri, another high ranking security officer, and a few members of parliament. Representing the Church was Bishop Gabriel of Beni Suef and Bishop Stephanos, while the village of Izbet Bushra was represented by Masri Abd al-Fattah and Mihkail Ayyad. These names were collected from articles in al-Dustur<sup>cxxvi</sup> and al-Wafd.<sup>cxxvii</sup> The two villagers jointly asked the governor to pave the main street of the village, to which he agreed, according to al-Wafd.<sup>cxxviii</sup> Al-Dustur adds that the government also agreed to carry out a reconciliation process, including compensation for harmed parties.<sup>cxxix</sup> The next day they report that the governor promised the Christians of Izbet Bushra a 300 m<sup>2</sup> house which would be allocated as a church, far away from the existing mosque.<sup>cxxx</sup> Our investigative reporter mentions land for a church, rather than a building, but notes it will be sufficient in size for Izbet Bushra as well as surrounding villages up to two kilometers away. He also reports the governor provided license for the second mosque, which was in process of being built in front of Fr. Kastour's residence.<sup>cxxxi</sup>

Fr. Kastour confirms the promise of land, stating the church has located a plot of 260 m<sup>2</sup>, but that security is still preventing their ability to build.<sup>cxxxii</sup> Local Christians add to the confusion of the situation, stating that a place for prayer has been found, but that it must be organized and a second floor added, stating that Fr. Hananiya cannot do this.<sup>cxxxiii</sup> They also question the sincerity of the reconciliation session itself, stating that security deliberately cut the electricity during the bishop's speech, at which point the governor laughed. Security members then exclaimed, they report, "The cross

is God's enemy."<sup>cxxxiv</sup> Father Kastour adds that sporadic sectarian incidents continue to occur. A house was set on fire, but the accusation of arson was falsely placed on the owner. From out in a field at night someone was firing upon Christian homes, but security ignored it, saying it was simply the blowout of a car tire. While these events have no independent confirmation, the priest accuses the security of neglect in order to create a state of confusion.<sup>cxxxv</sup> From the beginning to the end of this story, whoever is to blame, confusion is the apt word for description.

### *Area Developments*

As an aftermath, in the wake of the reconciliation meeting in Izbet Bushra, sectarian incidents occurred independently in two other villages of the Beba and el-Fashn bishopric. In Izbet Girgis, al-Arabi<sup>cxxxvi</sup> and Watani International<sup>cxxxvii</sup> report that in a similar manner to Izbet Bushra, Muslims of the village assembled after Friday prayers on July 3 to attack Christians for repeatedly holding prayers in the home of Fr. Sima'n Shihata of Julius al-Aqfahsi Church. Seven people were injured from both sides, and eighteen people arrested. Afterwards, a reconciliation meeting agreed that the Christians were to be given a church far from the mosque, and that all rioters should be punished.

Meanwhile, al-Dustur reports about an incident on July 19 in al-Fuka'i.<sup>cxxxviii</sup> After Friday prayers hundreds of Muslims surrounded a building holding prayers, and there ensued an exchange of rock throwing, followed by Muslim attacks on Christian homes. Fr. Yunan Bushri complained that the building, the Church of Anba Kirass, had conducted services unimpeded for the past twenty years. Security imposed a curfew and arrested fifteen people, and Attorney General for Beni Suef Hamdi Faruq is reported as having launched an investigation.

Our last inquiries into the area at the beginning of 2010 revealed that Fr. Kastour left the village in September and was replaced by Fr. Yacoub, who is celebrated by both Muslims and Christians; with Muslims especially happy over the replacement.<sup>cxxxix</sup> Though there was no clear source ordering this replacement—from church or from security—Fr. Yacoub states that Fr. Kastour's acceptance of his removal was from a spirit of self-sacrifice for the good of the community, recognizing he had become a divisive factor. He is now serving another village within the bishopric of Beba and el-Fashn.<sup>cxl</sup>

### **Current State of Relations**

Prior to the incidents described in the timeline above, it appears that the Muslims and Christians of Izbet Bushra had a generally amicable relationship. The village has shared educational systems and health services, and Christians note that they have grown up together. Even after the fact they clarify their complaint is not against their Muslim neighbors but against the security apparatus.<sup>cxli</sup> This claim is repeated by Fr. Abd al-Qudus Henna<sup>cxlii</sup> and Fr. Hananiya.<sup>cxliii</sup> Muslims also acknowledge that relations have been fine until now, and that since their childhood there have never been incidents like the ones of the past year.<sup>cxliv</sup> Fr. Abd al-Masih stated that such incidents would have been impossible ten years ago, for Bishop Athanasius kept good relations with both Muslims and security.<sup>cxlv</sup> Bishop Stephanos agrees, noting the skill his predecessor possessed in handling disputes in church building through continual compromise.<sup>cxlvi</sup>

### *Deteriorating?*

After the incidents, however, relations have soured considerably. Sheikh Ahmed Salem states the Muslims are not currently tolerant toward the Christians after suffering both a deception concerning the factory and then a planned attack against them.<sup>cxlvii</sup> Muslims say that the situation would improve if Christians had consideration for them, but that they would not have anticipated a different outcome concerning the church even so.<sup>cxlviii</sup> Muslims deny that the Christian community has grown substantially enough to demand a church, and they also deny their own second mosque was built to accommodate the growth of their own community,<sup>cxlix</sup> confirming it was built in response to the Christian effort. It is even reported by Christians that Muslims are attempting to change the name of the village to Izbet al-Islam, having hung a sign on the roadway to that effect.<sup>cl</sup>

The charges of the Christians concerning relations in the village have been written above, indicating that the tension between the two communities is palpable. For confirmation, however, Fr. Abd al-Qudus Henna reports that Muslim-Christian relations have worsened over the past years,<sup>cli</sup> and Fr. Kadous echoed the sentiments of many concerning the superficiality of the reconciliation sessions. He said this reconciliation was only on paper, and that the visits and promises of the governor are untruthful. He states the Muslim community is currently proud of the fact they were able to prevent the church from operating. Any real reconciliation, he declares, is conditional on official permission from state security to build a church. Why, he asks, should he need permission from his Muslim neighbor?<sup>clii</sup>

### *Christian Disagreement?*

Not all Christians agree with these sentiments. Though the situation in Izbet Bushra may be tense, in a recent survey of sixteen priests in the bishopric of Beba and al-Fashn, ten indicate relations are improving or at least stable, while only four priests believe they are deteriorating.<sup>cliii</sup> Though not represented in the survey, Fr. Musa Walim sees significant improvement in area Muslim-Christian relations. Concerning Izbet Bushra in particular he believes that Fr. Kastour bears much of the blame.<sup>cliv</sup> Our investigative reporter declares that it is known to all that Fr. Kastour is a troublemaker, and even the bishop is aware of this.<sup>clv</sup> Reports such as these indicate that the Christian community of Beni Suef suffers from internal disagreement.

This is witnessed in our efforts to visit Izbet Bushra. Prior to traveling to the area we were unofficially alerted to tensions between Bishop Stephanos and the area priests. Contacting the bishop from Cairo he gave us direct approval to visit the village. When we initially passed by the bishopric, however, he was absent and his deputy, Fr. Abd al-Qudus Henna, advised that our visit would not be wise, citing the fragile compromise that had been achieved following the reconciliation meeting. After a lengthy discussion in which much information was gained, but no progress made in visiting Izbet Bushra, Fr. Henna arranged for a chauffeur driven car to transport us back to Cairo.<sup>clvi</sup>

During our second visit to the bishopric Bishop Stephanos again gave his agreement to visit Izbet Bushra, even when we voiced we wished to speak to Sharif Sa'id, the security officer roundly condemned by Christians, to hear his side of the story. Fr. Henna reacted strongly against this, however, and we were warned against the visit because security would likely not approve. We had arranged approval with security prior to our travels, however, but the bishopric continued to vacillate, until again suggesting that our visit could put local relations at jeopardy. Still, they emphasized they did not want to obstruct us, and suggested we visit after first seeing another church where we could discuss directly with Christian villagers from Izbet Bushra. This meeting also produced much valuable perspective, but by

the time the meeting ended it was too late to visit the village itself, and no further efforts were made given the clear perception that the church did not favor the investigation.<sup>clvii</sup>

Part of the tension in the bishopric may stem from the fact that Bishop Stephanos is relatively young and recently established in his post. Of the 48 priests currently serving in the area, 30 of them were appointed by his skilled and popular predecessor, Bishop Athanasius.<sup>clviii</sup> The Christian villagers of Izbet Bushra declare that Bishop Stephanos is weak and confused; they desire a strong hand to answer the challenges their village faces. They see officials speak kindly to his face, but with empty words devoid of value, and as mentioned above, blame him for acceding to the demand of security that Fr. Kastour be temporarily removed from the village.<sup>clix</sup> Combined with sectarian incidents in other parts of the bishopric, certainly Bishop Stephanos has not been devoid of challenges, though neither has he had the time to earn the confidence in the manner his experienced, respected predecessor has.

### *Returning to Normal?*

Nevertheless, our most recent visit to Izbet Bushra revealed testimony from both the Muslim and Christian side that relations have returned to normal. Villagers state that most every Christian is involved in either business or agriculture with a Muslim, and these are once again good friends and neighbors. The restoration is attributed to the departure of Fr. Kastour, whom Muslims declare was deliberately unfriendly and promoted discord between the two communities. Our interview was conducted in a joint group of Muslims and Christians; though Christian testimony spoke nothing negative of Fr. Kastour, neither did they defend him against these Muslim accusations.<sup>clx</sup> Yet there still exists Christian frustration that the authorization to build a church is still pending.<sup>clxi</sup> While it seems that time has healed some wounds, as has the change in Christian religious leadership, security delays in authorizing the church suggest that official opinion still acknowledges religious tension in the village.

### **A Best Effort at Synthesis**

While all sides depict a scene of tolerance and general coexistence as the historic norm in Izbet Bushra, testimonies lack descriptions of warm exchanges of visits, continual communication between religious leaders, and examples of cooperation that go beyond necessity. While it may be too much to ask for our sources to transcend the current difficulties to recall the amicable details of the past, it seems rather that while there was little tension in the village, there was probably also little intentional interaction between the Muslim and Christian communities. Furthermore, if indeed the Christian community was experiencing natural population growth, they may well have outgrown the makeshift solutions of personal visitation by a distant priest in caring for their spiritual needs and worship opportunities. The longstanding presence of the mosque may have inspired the Christians, perhaps affected by an awareness of church building issues elsewhere, to seek a solution to this problem.

It is difficult to estimate from a distance the total population of Izbet Bushra, given especially the proximity of two other villages with the same name. It is suspected that the sources which reflect large numbers and great disparity between Muslim and Christian populations may conflate the three villages. It is also suspected, however, that sources which posit an even population distribution may suffer from a Christian tendency among some sectors to inflate their totals. It would seem likely that given the small territorial area of Izbet Bushra that the population numbers are nearer the smaller estimates, though with a Muslim numerical advantage of perhaps 60% to 75%.

If true, this would indicate an increasing population density which would naturally increase tensions in the village. If Christians and Muslims were already existing only tolerably then Christians can be understood, though not justified, for failing to involve local Muslims in their desire to build at least a residence for the priest, if not a formal church building. Consistent with Christian experience elsewhere in building churches, it is natural to expect their efforts to create facts on the ground to be preferable to the slow and uncertain procedures to operate through local and regional security.

Claims of the Muslim side about being surprised by the true purpose of the building seem somewhat suspect in this regard. While this may have been believed originally, the shape of the building did not reflect anything other than a general residence, as blueprints in our possession suggest. This suggestion should be made tentatively, but sources indicate there was suspicion about the building even before the priest began living there, and the press carries reports about vandalism against the building before the incidents of June 21. Certainly the building of a second mosque across from the building suggests religious competition in full understanding of the intentions of the Christians.

It is difficult to unravel the question of who sent the priest away from Izbet Bushra. Sources from both the Muslim and Christian side suggest that he played a negative role in the escalation of tensions, so it is believable that this came at either the instigation of the security or the bishopric. The priest's claim that it was arranged with an understanding security would register the church is difficult to dismiss, given also that it appears Bishop Stephanos officially consecrated the building as such before the priest's 'vacation', as well as by the claimed repeated visits to security when official registration was denied. At the same time this arrangement is difficult to swallow, since the Christians kept security officially in the dark about their purposes from the beginning, and since security is generally considered as a barrier to church construction. Having completed 'facts on the ground', however, perhaps the Christians then decided to open official channels.

Regardless of the origin of the priest's absence from Izbet Bushra, it is believable to perceive him as an instigator, however well intentioned. While in the past Bishop Athanasius was seen as a skilled negotiator and facilitator, Christians in the village appear to be more motivated by the current Christian preoccupation with 'rights'. It seems the priest was also of this perspective, and by all accounts, why should the Christians, given their sizeable contingent, not have a church? Fearing that the political reality would not allow for realization of these rights, however, the priest looks to have rallied the villagers in this effort to circumvent the law and achieve their objective without any consideration for the local sentiment of Muslims or security. In this understanding the bishop may have sent him away temporarily to curb his enthusiasm, or security may have grown tired of his activism. In either case, upon his return he seems to have been only further energized.

It is not possible based on current sources to establish that prayers were held continually in the building, but that they were held seems certain, and that it was on more than one occasion seems probable. Press reports declare that by invitation fifty families attended mass the day before the incident. Was this a first-time occurrence?

Multiple sources confirm the incidents originated with what appears to be an unplanned visit by visitors to the priest's residence. It is natural to imagine that the commotion of visitors being held up by security outside the building would attract the attention of the Muslims on their way to Friday prayers. That they would follow up with a visit of inquiry follows as a consequence of witnessing the prayers from the day before. From here it is difficult to ascertain the act of first aggression. With security already on the scene would Muslims proceed with an attack on the building? Perhaps with encouragement from

security this is possible, as is alleged by the Christians, but this seems unlikely. Would the previous day's prayers have been sufficient to engender the rage necessary to conduct an attack? Would it have been sufficient if understood as the last straw in their growing frustration against the Christians for illegal meetings? Either scenario is possible, but their claims of Christian instigation are uniform and dispassionate, suggesting resignation rather than rage, though conceivably reflecting a rehearsed alibi.

The attack on the building—if it occurred—and the subsequent attack on Christian homes—which is better documented in the press—seem more likely to be a reaction to Christian provocation than a premeditated response to the Christian prayers. The Muslim claim that Christians, led by the priest, began the stone throwing from the roof would be an example of sufficient provocation. The first question to consider is if the visit by the young men from Cairo was a random event. Could they have been invited in an effort to stir trouble? This seems unlikely, though possible. Furthermore, media reports declare the altercation began when the visitors descended from the third floor residence. Did they then hurry back up in order to throw stones? A key question reflects lack of familiarity with the village: From where did the Christian-thrown stones come? Is it natural to have stones on one's roof? If not, when did the Christians bring them up? Might there have been bricks on the roof left over from the construction? There would not be time to adequately gather stones sufficient for a confrontation if they had previously descended, though perhaps they intended only enough to disperse the crowd. Though possible, this seems very unlikely in addition to being foolish. Did they then previously gather a large amount of stones in anticipation of a conflict? If so, when? Security surely would have prevented this as the visitors sought to enter. Does this suggest then that the visit was prearranged and the priest had assembled the stones long before? Such scheming seems unlikely, though conceivable. Might the priest have decided the best way to register the church, given all previous frustrations, was to spark an incident which would lead to a reconciliation meeting, which could lead to a concession to allow the church to operate? This would be a very convoluted conspiracy theory. Perhaps the priest thought of the possibility or even eventuality of a conflict surround the building, and sought to be prepared? To be considered, however, is that the exchange of rock throwing from the roof comes only from Muslim testimony; could it be invented?

It is too difficult to guess at the line of truth amid all these questions, and equally futile to assign proper numbers to the injured and arrested totals. As for the latter, it is common for security to arrest equal numbers from each side regardless of guilt, and it is easy to understand Christian sources which only report the number from their side. There is a significant question concerning the injured, however, for independent media articles declare Christians to be primarily the victims, while another establishes a higher Muslim count. Unfortunately, this issue is tied to the nature of the clash itself, for if Christians attacked from the roof it is understandable to estimate higher Muslim casualties, while once set off the Muslim crown may have suffered comparably little compared to the Christian injured left in their wake. Claims of torture, however, are harder to believe.

Also hard to conscience is the continuing atrocities claimed by Christians following June 21 of the curfew. Why would either security or Muslim villagers break into homes and damage goods and attack persons? Since the listed accounts are limited in number, they may reflect abnormal incidents which are treated as official persecution by the suffering community. Yet the vehemence in which the accounts are told suggests there are real incidents behind the stories. Some of this may well reflect security over-vigilance; in an effort to contain the story, establishing curfew, denying outside access, and cutting lines of communication may have been community wide, yet interpreted by Christians as directed at them. Of course, their accusations may be true, but our sources are lacking in confirmation.

Perhaps due to the rapid media reporting, and perhaps also to the Christian demonstration at the Virgin Church in al-Fashn, authorities descended quickly to Izbet Bushra to conduct reconciliation sessions. It is clear that the Christian side was not satisfied by the reconciliation; Muslims equally do not reflect a conciliatory attitude toward their counterparts. What likely occurred was an official effort to contain and suppress the conflict, plastering over a tense situation. While security enforces the calm, important figures lend their presence to validate the peace. Compensation was promised in addition to land for a church and a license for the second mosque, ostensibly setting the claims of all sides. Meanwhile the status quo is untouched, for local security can continue to block the development of a church building despite official sanction, and the release of all arrested parties signals that the guilt of none has been established. As both sides blame the other, each remains frustrated by the lack of justice.

The resulting frustration, however, perhaps signals the validity of each one's claims, as well as the correct interpretations of events. The Christians decry a lack of justice. While this is understood in the case of inequitable church building laws, the fact of their evasions in the legal process suggest their frustrations lie elsewhere. Instead it seems that their animosity stems from having suffered at the hands of Muslims and/or security, but that the reconciliation sessions have let the guilty go free. If their accusations against the security apparatus in particular have any merit, their ability to stand above the law would be infuriating.

The Muslims, however, do not decry a lack of justice. Their complaints, instead, focus on the provocation of the Christians. This appears to be true in the case of Christian conduct in worship, first in using deception to construct a church, then in intransigence in conducting prayers therein despite official prohibition. If the Christians had a leading role, however, in provoking the incident of June 21 itself, and the Muslims suffered as innocent bystanders between rock-throwing Christians and security, one would expect more frustration with the lack of justice following the reconciliation sessions. Instead, they isolate the role of Christians and the priest in particular as troublemakers, and seem content in the return of the status quo. While this, of course, is tangential evidence, it may suggest a way to interpret the varying claims and complaints of both sides.

### ***Suggestions for Reconciliation***

Any suggestions for reconciliation from outside Izbet Bushra must be understood as limited in scope, challenging in application, and likely idealistic in nature. The solutions to the recent and lingering tensions in Izbet Bushra must come from within the village itself, secondarily from the surrounding area leadership, thirdly from national initiative, and only lastly from foreign intervention. The goal of outside reconciliation efforts is to encourage the two sides to talk to one another, that they might find mutually beneficial solutions. Nevertheless, the outsider—whether Egyptian or foreign—is able perhaps to analyze the situation and suggest solutions hidden to those invested in the conflict who are tied to their own interest and hardened against the other. It is in this spirit these observations are offered.

#### *For the Muslims*

From one perspective the easiest solution to the conflict is to allow the Christians to have a church. As the priest has stated this has been their one objective; once the state allows them their 'right' then they can engage in reconciliation with the Muslim villagers. This could be achieved simply by executive fiat with appropriate pressure placed on local security agents to allow the building, providing protection should there be Muslim villager resistance.

While this would satisfy the demands of the Christians, and in accordance with the principles of citizenship and religious equality can be seen as a just decision, if enacted in the face of Muslim resistance it will do nothing to engender reconciliation of the parties. The current situation of Christians stewing in their discontent, alienated from the state which they interpret as acting against them, would simply be switched. Instead it would be Muslims complaining about the heavy hand of the state which would be interpreted as acting against Islam in favor of the Christian minority. Whereas this current situation calls for reconciliation of the parties, the imagined situation should the state intervene and grant a church would issue the same necessity for mediation.

Could this situation be avoided if of their own accord the Muslims of Izbet Bushra granted the Christians of the village a church? It would be expected this overture would be warmly received and could break down Christian mistrust toward their community. By acting magnanimously Muslims would demonstrate leadership in the village, conceding their own position for the sake of peace, with no guarantees concerning the Christian response. The Christians may simply rejoice in their victory and demonstrate a sense of triumph over their agitators. It would require much Muslim patience to endure this, but with the hope of right relations in fear of God, it could be done.

How might Muslims be convinced this is the best course of events? Recent rulings from al-Azhar have demonstrated the position of Islamic leadership that churches are welcome, not forbidden, in Islamic lands. Furthermore Muslims themselves may assist in their construction. Qur'anic verses could be highlighted, such as ones which declare the Christians are closest of all people to the Muslims, as well as the fact of God creating different peoples so that they can know one another. Other verses counsel patience in the face of adversity and suffering, and commend to Muslims that when wronged they have recompense to repay the wrong, yet they do better when they forgive and return kindness in its stead. Simply presenting this message will be of little good; the authority of the Sheikh of al-Azhar has been challenged in this issue, and perhaps other Qur'anic verses could be counter-quoted. In any case a hardened heart cannot be softened by religious rebuke. If a respected scholar, however, can preach this message to the Muslims of Izbet Bushra, perhaps they can be transformed. Persuasion is not enough; this should not be a political decision. Yet if their hearts are religiously remade, reoriented toward the importance of brotherhood with Christians, from here real reconciliation can take place. Who could be selected as such an advocate for peace?

#### *For the Christians*

So far this analysis has been one sided, focusing on the fulfillment of Christian demands. It could be said equally that reconciliation should begin by the Christian forfeiting of their desire for a church. While this is the current enforced state of affairs, though with promise of a church that is slow in actuality, can the Christians be transformed in such a way that they yield for the sake of Muslim misunderstanding and religious foibles, for the good of the community? The New Testament understanding of 'church' primarily refers to the organic community of believers acting in cooperation in worship, teaching, and service—both toward their community and the world. The idea of a place in which to conduct these matters is tangential to Biblical witness. While admitting ignorance about the necessity of a 'place' in the orthodox understanding, if this is a concept the Christians of Izbet Bushra can adopt, they would be less zealous to pursue their 'right' for a church in either the religious or the political framework.

Freed from their efforts, however noble or correct, to secure their rights, the Christians of Izbet Bushra could instead follow the Biblical injunctions to love their neighbors as themselves. If, before

anything else, they can repent of their attitude toward the Muslims, apologizing for their deception and whatever share they had in the incident of June 21, they then can take leadership in the village by accommodating the demands of the other. By pursuing trust and cooperation they with the Muslims they will actually lay the groundwork to build a church for themselves without resistance from their neighbors. Yet this must not be a calculated plan; it must be a change in heart that reflects the understanding the Muslims may not reciprocate. As they are accused of doing now, the Muslims may rejoice they kept their village clean from the stench of a church, and accept simply that Christians are finally accepting their rightful dhimmi status. It would require much Christian patience to endure this, but in hope of right relationships in fear of God, it could be done.

#### *For the Mediator*

The question is the same: Who could be selected as such an advocate for peace? Assuming that such people can be found, a key suggestion for reconciliation is that they be engaged to work together. Though the Muslim and the Christian both will work somewhat exclusively in the beginning each with his own community, if these efforts can be coordinated it could provide a powerful example and impetus for each community to reevaluate its position toward the other. The value of a one-sided initiative, as described above, should not delay the communication of this message if a co-religious presentation is difficult to arrange, but much effort should go into finding the right people and enabling them to work together for this goal.

Communication of a message, however, is only a partial effort at facilitating reconciliation. Certainly, if the religious encouragement can be wholeheartedly accepted this would greatly aid the reconciliation process, but other steps can be seen as useful that are more consistent with human nature. Specifically, this concerns the crafting of a project which would require inter-community participation.

#### *For a Project*

The nature of this project should be guided by parties knowledgeable of the local setting. They would know the needs prevalent and the resources available, as well as the local administrative framework in which to proceed. Local non-government organizations (NGO) are well equipped in this regard, but come with an important caveat—they are often religiously motivated, and thus potentially suspect to one party or the other.

If there is to be outside participation in the facilitation of reconciliation, it is absolutely vital the outsiders are not perceived as biased towards one party. Since each NGO will have its own leanings, it is important that the outsiders work with a grouping of area NGOs across the religious spectrum. Besides protecting a neutral status this arrangement will also encourage the NGOs themselves to cooperate, strengthening the communal knowledge base, skill set, and project initiatives across the region.

The details of the project are perhaps not so important, but concerning Izbet Bushra a few suggestions are appropriate. One idea could focus on a factory. Since this was the original failed promise, the building of a true factory could be seen as righting this wrong, raising the economic state of the village while employing Muslims and Christians together in labor, administration, and management. Or, a project could work through the joint associations which already exist in the village, such as the school system or health unit. The important idea behind the project is to facilitate the natural interaction of members of the religious communities, so that through extensive contact they would see

each other as neighbors and human beings, little different from themselves. Pragmatically, people will tend to set aside differences for the sake of making money, educating their children, or securing their health. If the religious message above can be preached in the context of this practical interaction, it may find a better reception. At the very least, it will be given in the natural setting of already existing relationships, rather than undertaking the harder work of convincing people these relationships are necessary.

## **Conclusion**

### *Identifying Fault*

Though the facts about the incident of Izbet Bushra are difficult to unravel, it appears that the issue of church building served to divide the community along religious lines. Many parties have a share in the blame. Muslim villagers, to some degree, did not mind Christian prayers being offered in the homes of villagers, but for some reason were offended by the construction of a church. Though the background reasons for this are unclear, their negative reaction is made understandable by attempts by Christians to deceive them about the true nature of the building they intended to be a church. This circumvention of the law and of honest transparency is made understandable by the difficulties in general suffered by Egyptian Christians. Blame therefore even extends to the government for failing to pass a unified law for building houses of worship, of which the effects are witnessed in both religious communities of Izbet Bushra.

While such blame is true of the background issue of church building it is harder to apply the labels of instigator and victim as per the conflict itself which took place on June 21, 2009. Two items, however, are necessary to highlight. First, questions of guilt were never officially determined, as all arrested parties were released following the reconciliation session. It appears that both sides committed acts of aggression, though perhaps the general Christian community suffered greater damage. Regardless, no one was held accountable for the violence, which reflects a failure in application of the law and seems likely to harden the feelings of frustration on both sides. Testimony that community relations have returned to normal are encouraging, but it can only be imagined that with perpetrators free on both sides that the village relations must continue to be awkward.

Second, the testimony of 'good friends and neighbors' is difficult to understand given the incident itself. Izbet Bushra is a small village; it is not as if factions are likely to hold opposite views in independence and isolation from greater community opinion. Though relations may have been cordial, and appear to have returned to this state, it would be difficult to describe them as strong. Fr. Kastour may have had a disproportionate effect in deteriorating relations, but this would only be possible if they were somewhat weak to begin with. Muslims and Christians of Izbet Bushra may have been integrated; why was such tension able to take hold?

Muslims may perhaps be faulted for a desire to keep a church from being built in their village, but Christians appear to be guilty of operating independently. The incident in Izbet Bushra suggests the importance of harmonious, integrated community relations, which appear to have been lacking. Local leadership also, though little testimony is offered to their role, is indicted by silence for failing to prevent tensions from escalating. Religious leadership is at the forefront of this conflict, and appears to bear the greatest blame. Each of these factors can be taken as a lesson for avoidance of such conflict when a church building issue takes hold of a community.

### *How to Build a Church*

To speak positively, then, should the Christians of village 'A' desire to build a church, they would do well to cultivate relations with Muslim neighbors significantly before taking action in construction, even in seeking a permit. While Christians on the political front at both national and local levels should speak of their rights to worship, this battle should be fought on the community front. Instead they must approach Muslim neighbors, not for permission, but for cooperation and assistance. Both religious and perhaps more importantly civil leadership from the two communities should open a dialogue to determine any levels of Muslim resistance. Yet with good relations in place, why should Muslims reject an initiative to build a place for Christian worship consistent with village needs?

If there is opposition, Christians must be patient and resist the desire to resort to politics. This is not to say that they should take no recourse to the law, or perhaps even to media. What is important that Christians maintain a posture of respect and cooperation toward their Muslim neighbors, committing themselves to their shared community. In Izbet Bushra when opposition was anticipated, Christians immediately thought only of their interests and began seeking their rights. Though rights are indeed important and should never be forfeited, they displayed a spirit inconsistent with their religious faith which urges attention be paid to the interests of the other. Despite being proper Christianity, this is also proper neighborliness.

### *A Unified Law for Building Houses of Worship*

Yet this paper will close with a statement that Christians do have rights. Passage of a unified law for building houses of worship would go a long way in preventing conflicts such as that witnessed in Izbet Bushra. Passage of this law may prove a temptation to Christians to then enact their rights without reference to greater community contextual issues, and they must be careful to exercise their newfound freedom with responsibility and consideration. Nevertheless, for the sake of religious freedom in a civil society founded on equality, the lack of such a law only encourages Christians to doubt the foundation of the state which protects the sanctity of all and to which their loyalty is owed. Failure to pass such a law moves both Christians and Muslims away from this unifying principle, and risks increasing the pressures of sectarianism on all. Essentially, the building of a church in Izbet Bushra is a local issue; its implications, however, apply to the entire nation. It is hoped that this paper has provided insight into a small scale conflict which may benefit all who read, that all parties at all levels of Egyptian society may strengthen their commitment one to another in freedom and equality.

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- xxxiv From interview with Ezzat Siyam, Yacoub Rizq, Mikha'il, and Fr. Abd al-Masih in Beba, July 21, 2009 and AWR 2009, week 45, article 3.
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