



Pearls of peace

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Fadia O.'s "safe world peace" jewelry has been worn by actress Sharon Stone, singer Fergie from the Black Eyed Peas and French soccer star Franc LeBoeuf. The Parisian jewelry designer, who was born and raised in Beirut, features the Islamic crescent, the Christian cross and the Jewish Star of David together in her jewelry line to form one unmistakable message of tolerance and peace.

So it's fitting that Fadia also wore a diamond-studded necklace from her collection this week during her first trip to Israel, which is officially at war with her native Lebanon.

Fadia, who is Christian but came here as a part of a five-day tour for French Muslim leaders, said she was eager to visit the Jewish state "to discover my neighbors." Her trip, she said, has affirmed her belief that peace is possible among peoples of all faiths.

"We are very much manipulated by thoughts, and you need lots of courage to do what I'm doing now," she told *The Jerusalem Post* from the French ambassador's residence in Jaffa. "To come, to feel it and see it, because I don't believe what I read. I need to see it. I need to talk to people and people confirmed to me today - elders, teachers, politicians - everyone wants peace." She added that she was "very, very excited" to see "this beautiful country."

She was also immediately struck by how many similarities she found with her native country and culture. "What I see is that it smells the same, the sea looks the same, the weather is the same. Many people ask me if I'm Palestinian or Jewish Israeli, but I am Lebanese. In the last 24 hours that I'm here, everyone looks the same, and we have the same smell of oranges, the same lemons, the same olives, so I really don't see the point of going through all this [conflict]. My heart is broken," she said, that much of her life "has been in war."

Valerie Hoffenberg, director of the American Jewish Committee's office in France who led the group, said she was pleased to let Fadia participate. "I think it's very moving. She put herself in danger because clearly it's forbidden" for her to come, Hoffenberg said of Fadia. "She said, 'I want to come and if we want to build this Mediterranean Union, it will start with civil society.'"

The goal of the trip, Hoffenberg said, is to allow French Muslim leaders to confront their ideas of Israel with the reality, and to help them understand why French Jews are so supportive of Israel. The project was organized by the Washington-based Project Interchange. The trip included visits to Jewish, Muslim and Christian holy sites in Jerusalem, a tour of Yad Vashem and a visit to Beit Hanassi. The guests also visited Ramallah and Bethlehem and met with Palestinian Authority officials.

FADIA, 40, WAS seven years old at the start of Lebanon's civil war in 1975. Growing up in Beirut

during wartime was stressful and unnerving, she said. As a young adult in the late 1980s, she had little opportunity to mix with people of other faiths. "I was very isolated where I lived... There were only Christians. We had bombs all day long on our heads. I had no chance to meet with anybody else."

Fadia said that her younger brother, her only sibling, was killed by a bomb, something she was reluctant to discuss at length. "He died when he was 19 years old and I was 21, and he was the only male child in the family. My heart is broken; I cannot speak a lot about my brother and his death... We are still in pain."

And she believes she is still paying the price of war. Fadia, who has long eaten organic food and lives a healthy lifestyle, was diagnosed in August with a rare form of breast cancer that doctors told her was mainly a result of stress.

On Monday evening, a colorful scarf covered her head that has become bald as a result of chemotherapy.

"War is killing us directly and indirectly," she said. "Look at me, I have cancer. I'm fighting for life. I am only 40 years old, and the only thing I want is to live. How come everyone forgets that killing is cutting [off] life?"

Fadia decided to leave Lebanon when tensions erupted between Christian political factions - both Maronite Christian - in 1990. Born to a Maronite mother and a Catholic father, she thought that if people of the same religion were fighting one another in her country and since she had already lost her brother, "I better get out of here and save my skin."

She lived in Cyprus for a time - where her mother moved after her son's death - before moving to Paris. Her desire to understand other cultures and religions also led her to Indonesia, where she lived for three years and studied Islam.

Throughout her adult life, she has made it a point to befriend Jews and Muslims, she said. The godmother of her son is a Jewish woman named Ruth Levy. "My best friends are Muslim and my best friends are Jewish, and we really don't feel that we are enemies," she said.

Fadia started designing jewelry professionally 12 years ago and specializes in pearls. She was inspired to create her "safe world peace" jewelry featuring the three religious symbols after watching news reports of the London terrorist attacks in July 2005, while she was visiting Lebanon with her son. She saw "the first attack in London, the second attack in London and the third attack, and I drew this necklace in one second, like a chicken [laying] an egg," she said. "I told my mother that this is what I'm doing; I'm going to dedicate my life to this project."

The attacks, she said, reminded her of her former life in war-torn Lebanon, where she says "a cancer" started in 1975, metastasized and spread to the rest of the world. "Now the war is everywhere and people are killing with no reason, just for killing, and I want to say 'Enough!' This is how I created this project."

Her "safe world peace" collection ranges from €90 to up to €10,000, and it is the only jewelry she produces "en masse" so she can spread her message of peace, she said.

Fadia donates 10 percent of the proceeds from the jewelry line to schools in the Middle East and to war-torn countries, she said.

She said that peace is everyone's individual responsibility, not just that of governments or politicians. "If we educate the children, and our mothers, and we open our hearts and minds to discover the other,

then we can share everything," she said. "If we want to think, 'Let the politicians or the government resolve the problem,' it's not going to be resolved."

On Monday, Fadia and the rest of the group visited the "Bridge Over the Wadi" bilingual Jewish-Arab school in Kafr Kara, where she was moved by what she saw in a kindergarten class.

"They were singing half the songs in Arabic and half the songs in Hebrew," she said. "One teacher was veiled, another was Ashkenazi, and another was Sephardi. I'm so excited to say that I am not a crazy person and this is true and it could happen - peace and living together. Every person I speak to individually says yes, so what's wrong? Why can't we live together?"

She says she is planning to build a soccer field in Gaza, invite 200 Palestinian children and 200 Jewish children to learn to play together under the instruction of her friend, soccer star LeBoeuf. "I heard that the children are playing there with a head of a human being," she said. "If we let the children play and sing, they will not kill each other."

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