

Together for the Protection of Our Presence

In recent times, we've witnessed a series of events that have disrupted the harmony of the Christian presence in the Holy Land. One such event is the controversial deal involving a portion of properties in the Armenian Quarter of the Old City in Jerusalem. These occurrences are part of a broader pattern of recurring attacks on Christian churches, cemeteries, clergy, nuns, pilgrims, and Christian gatherings across various regions in our lands. This situation leads us to believe that there is a deliberate Israeli policy aimed at targeting our historical existence, institutions, rituals, and spiritual symbols. This policy is occurring within the context of the occupation's efforts to assert control over Jerusalem, to Judaize sacred lands, and to intimidate and displace Christians.

The current deal is set against a backdrop of ongoing political realities and the mounting pressures imposed by the Israeli occupation on the freedom to worship. As Palestinian Christians, we perceive the Israeli authorities as being lenient in holding those responsible for attacks on Christian and Islamic properties accountable. We also note their reluctance in safeguarding the freedom of expression, and their imposition of restrictive and provocative measures during non-Jewish religious observances. These actions represent clear violations of our heritage, existence, and historical legacy. They stand in opposition to the cultural, religious, and spiritual diversity that characterizes the holy lands, and are in conflict with the principles enshrined in human rights and international law.

The challenges that have accumulated in Jerusalem's neighborhoods, including restrictions on Christian observances during holidays and on Muslims at the Al-Aqsa Mosque, as well as alterations to the character of Palestinian neighborhoods, reveal a long-term Israeli strategy aimed at undermining the presence of Jerusalem's inhabitants. This strategy involves taking over our neighborhoods in Jerusalem, intimidating its residents, reshaping the city, and altering its identity. This agenda sidelines the indigenous population and disregards their rights and freedoms. It occasionally even excludes Jews who dissent from the prevailing Israeli regime.

Jerusalem carries deep symbolic significance for the three major monotheistic religions and their various denominations. Its heritage is one of embracing diversity, respecting multiplicity, and upholding spiritual and humane values. Rooted in our Christian and Palestinian heritage within this land, and recognizing the significance of preserving our historical existence, safeguarding our sacred sites, and maintaining our traditions, we collectively appeal:

- We call upon all Patriarchs and Church leaders, urging them to cooperate with us. It is imperative that we work hand in hand to protect our sacred sites. The targeting of any Christian or Palestinian spiritual symbol has an impact on all of us. Let us dutifully uphold the message of Christ by safeguarding our sanctities and the gatherings that have existed since the early days of the Church. Let us protect our legitimate human right to exist. By engaging in constructive and open dialogue inspired by our faith, we can avoid succumbing to policies of intimidation. Let us stand firm, believing that the Holy Spirit unites, consoles, and guides those who follow the path of truth.

- We call upon our congregations, families, and Christian communities within our land, we recognize that our destinies are intertwined. The trials faced by one of us reverberate through all. Our response must be one of unity, resilience, steadfastness, and faith, modeled after the teachings of our Lord Jesus Christ. He taught us to love one another and to reject injustice and discrimination. Generation after generation since the early Christian community, we've kept the flame of faith alive and practiced our rituals. We've never and will never accept encroachments on our properties or their erosion. We believe that Jerusalem's essence accommodates diversity, where we overcome all challenges.

- We call upon our Palestinian and Arab brethren of diverse backgrounds; we emphasize the importance of collaborative efforts to safeguard the freedom of worship and protect the sanctities, guided by principles of brotherhood, dignity for all, and the imperative of preserving the cultural landmarks of East Jerusalem.

- We call upon our brothers and sisters in churches worldwide. We sense a rising threat of displacement of Christians from the Holy Land. More than two thousand years ago, a message of love emanated from this land. Sustaining the Christian presence is vital to Jerusalem's legacy. We appeal to you to engage earnestly and ardently in efforts to defend the freedom of worship in the Holy Land. Let us follow in the footsteps of the early Christians, both men and women, and have faith that God is with us.

- We call upon our fellow believers within the Armenian Apostolic Church, both within the country and around the world. We share your concerns for Jerusalem and the Armenian Quarter. We urge His Beatitude Patriarch Nourhan Manougian to engage in dialogue with us and share additional details about the deal. It is time to move from reproach to action. The loss of any part of the Armenian Quarter, with its centuries-old history, could sound an alarm for the entire Christian presence in the city. We hope for measures to be implemented that protect the Quarter's residents and the city itself, preserving its identity and the freedom of its inhabitants by annulling the deal. Our hope is that we will leave a legacy and a legacy for generations to come, with history commemorating these endeavors.

- We call upon the Israeli authorities, as they bear the responsibility for security and safety in occupied East Jerusalem in accordance to international law and conventions. We call upon them to fulfill their duty of safeguarding our institutions and historical presence. The ceaseless attacks on our sanctities must stop, and protection for our sanctities and establishments must remain steadfast, without yielding to expansionist agendas. Jerusalem does not belong exclusively to any religion or faith; we are entitled to security and peace in our homes, neighborhoods, properties, and places of worship. This right is legally legitimate. We also address Israeli citizens and groups opposing current Israeli policies, encouraging them to take action and exert pressure to secure freedom of worship for all.

- Lastly, we turn to the international community, urging you to assume your role with integrity and steadfastness. Support our cause and engage actively in efforts to end the occupation, and pressure Israel to uphold international law and human rights.

Standing unwavering and resolute, we lend our support to the endeavors of honorable young leaders who strive to protect our neighborhoods, sanctities, homeland, and historical legacy. We are dedicated to safeguarding all neighborhoods in Jerusalem. Let us endorse the movement to protect the Armenian Quarter and achieve justice and transparency. We call on maximum participation in weekly activities aimed at preserving the Armenian Quarter. We also call for the support of various initiatives designed to bolster the New Gate area and Jaffa Gate.

We are an integral thread in the cultural tapestry of Jerusalem, determined to remain deeply rooted in our land. Uprooting us from our historical heritage and the establishments that have endured for centuries is both unacceptable and implausible. Our commitment to our faith and rituals is unwavering. From this land, the divine message of love was launched, and it is on this land that we are determined to experience freedom, dignity, and lasting peace.

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