

January 30, 2025

DISSEMINATION BY THE LIVINGSTON GROUP, LLC

FARA Registration #6344

The Livingston Group represents the Commissariat of the Holy Land for the USA.

We would be grateful for your consideration of the attached letter and request.

THE LIVINGSTON GROUP PROVIDES REPRESENTATION FOR THE COMMISSARIAT OF THE HOLY LAND FOR THE USA, A CHARITABLE ORGANIZATION. ADDITIONAL INFORMATION IS AVAILABLE AT THE DEPARTMENT OF JUSTICE, WASHINGTON, DC.

Since October 2023, the people and the State of Israel have faced extraordinary challenges and uncertainty because of terrorism, an ongoing war, and now a fragile ceasefire deal. An unstable physical and economic situation is pervasive throughout civil society, including among the Christian Churches in Israel.

Amidst this time of crisis, several municipalities have issued warning letters and initiated legal proceedings against the Custody of the Holy Land and other Catholic and Christian institutions for alleged municipal tax debts. Some municipalities have even begun freezing the Christian Churches accounts and are withholding annual school funds. While the pressure of municipal taxes is not new, this recent escalation represents an unprecedented, coordinated attack on the Christian presence in the Holy Land.

In accordance to historical and contemporary agreements, the Christian Churches of Israel benefit from a special legal and tax status. The exemption from municipal taxes allows for greater investment in services that are a benefit to society – schools, hospitals, churches, eldercare homes, etc. – and that supplement the work of the State. The absence of exemptions and imposition of past taxes would be financially debilitating to the Christian Churches of Israel, compromising these social services and harming the Christian and other populations that rely on them.

The actions of the municipalities contradict these agreements and violates the status quo, which dictates, among other things, that the Holy See and the State of Israel will negotiate a comprehensive agreement on disputed issues such as municipal taxes and that municipalities stay the enforcement of municipal taxes.

The Custos of the Holy Land, Fr. Francesco Patton, OFM, together with other Heads of the Christian Churches in Israel, has appealed to Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu to intervene as before and cancel all legal and collection proceedings. They also have affirmed a readiness to identify a sustainable resolution to the issue of municipal taxes through a special committee first proposed in 2018 by the Government of Israel (see enclosures).

Thus, we appeal to the Trump Administration to address this issue forthwith with Prime Minister Netanyahu and the Government of Israel. The United States and Israel are committed partners. As such, we must engage on issues of mutual and global interest like the enduring Christian presence in the Holy Land. The Prime Minister's visit to Washington, DC in the week(s) to come presents an exemplary opportunity.

Thank you for your consideration.

Jerusalem, June 18, 2024

Prime Minister Netanyahu,

In the past eight months and until these moments, the Churches in Israel have been facing challenges and difficulties of uncertainty, an unstable economic situation, and empty churches devoid of pilgrims.

During this period, the Heads of the Churches continue praying for better days for all and for peace.

Regretfully and surprisingly, especially in these times, Israeli Municipalities have decided to employ a general attack on the Churches and all Christians who look to Jerusalem as their Spiritual Home.

In recent months local authorities including Jerusalem, Tel Aviv-Jaffa, Nazareth and Ramla, have approached various Churches across Israel with warning letters through lawyers, initiating legal proceedings in various courts against these Churches for alleged municipal tax debts. We believe these efforts represent a coordinated attack on the Christian presence in the Holy Land.

We follow with concern this campaign against the Churches and the Christian community in the Holy Land, which has reached an unprecedented level, dragging the Churches into legal proceedings from north to south. In response we assert our historical and legal rights, which Municipal actors are now trying to violate.

These tendentious actions contradict the historical stance of the Churches and their relations with the authorities, violating existing agreements and international commitments that ensure the rights of the Churches, breaking the *status quo* that has guided us for years, and contradicting your 2018 declaration on suspending collection procedures.

For centuries, ever since the Ottoman ruling, Church properties in the Holy Land have been exempt from municipal taxes. This has been the right of the Churches, who have used this right to invest heavily in the services that benefit all of society – this includes church-built and run schools, kindergartens, hospitals, convents, churches, houses for the elderly and other various activities that supplement the work of the State itself.

Unfortunately, this is not the first time that the Israeli authorities have led such an offensive action against the Churches and the Christian world. As you recall, in 2018, the Church of the Holy Sepulchre was closed, for the first time since the establishment of the State of Israel, capturing the attention of the entire Christian world. This act of protest was taken when churches were threatened, then too, by the local authorities with legal and enforcement actions due to alleged municipal tax debts. As a result, after you understood the expected severe damage to the churches and the Christian world, you immediately declared the suspension of collection proceedings and the establishment of a committee headed by Mr. Tzachi Hanegbi to formulate a solution to the Arnona issue.

And now, contrary to those declarations, and especially in this time, when the whole world, and the Christian world in particular, are constantly following the events in Israel, we find ourselves, once again, dealing with an attempt by authorities to drive the Christian presence out of the Holy Land.

It is an outrage that, specifically at these sensitive and complicated times when patience, compassion, unity in prayers and hope should prevail, municipalities are opening cases against Churches in courts and making threats. This constitutes contempt of our customs and that which is dear to us, while trampling the mutual respect, which existed between us until this time.

We are aware of your views and statements on the need to respect Christian community, as you stated in 2018 when you ordered the suspension of collection proceedings against churches. We appreciate and value your attitude toward us in Israel. Once again, we find ourselves needing to call upon the government of Israel to intervene as the ultimate responsibility and face of Israel.

We believe that your position as the first representative of the State and its sovereignty compels you to take every step in your power and exercise any influence deriving from your office to alert the Municipalities throughout Israel to their actions and the possible consequences thereof, as we have experienced with you before.

We call on you to do all that is in your power to direct these local municipalities to cancel all legal proceedings against the churches and any other collection procedures. We want you to understand that in the face of this reality, we as Christian leaders cannot sit idly by and act as if everything is fine.

Accordingly, we the Heads of Christian Churches in Israel, see our approach to you as our last chance to find a sustainable resolution as was promised in 2018, to avoid another unwanted crisis with the Churches.

We thank you in advance and continue to pray and hope for better days for all of us.

+Patriarch Theophilos III, Greek Orthodox Patriarchate

+Patriarch Nourhan Manougian, Armenian Apostolic Orthodox Patriarchate

+Patriarch Pierbattista Cardinal Pizzaballa, Latin Patriarchate

+Archbishop Hussam Na'om, Anglican Episcopal Diocese

+Fr. Francesco Patton, ofm, Custos of the Holy Land

Copy: Mr. Tzachi Hanegbi

JOINT STATEMENT OF THE PATRIARCHS AND HEADS OF CHURCHES OF THE HOLY LAND

Jerusalem

July 2, 2024

With a positive atmosphere, the Patriarchs and Heads of Churches of the Holy Land met today with His Excellency the Mayor of Jerusalem, Mr. Moshe Leon, to convey to him in person the contents of their letter to Prime Minister Netanyahu earlier in June and their concern from the recent legal actions of the municipality against the Churches for the collection of so called Municipal taxes debts.

The Heads of Churches reiterated their long-standing position that such unilateral actions by the Municipalities is not in accordance with the Status Quo and with the rights of the Churches, recognized and upheld for centuries and granted to the Churches for their immense contribution to the Holy Land and the Holy City of Jerusalem.

The Heads of Churches insisted that any solution for the pending issues between the Churches and the municipalities must be solved through dialogue with the government that possesses a holistic understanding of the complex matters and relationships. The Heads of Churches restated their readiness to hold dialogue with the special committee created by the Government in 2018 for this purpose, and sincerely see that the Municipalities will be part of this holistic solution.

The Heads of Churches await the response of His Excellency the Prime Minister to their letter in this regard, and in the meantime look to His Excellency the Mayor and his positive reception of today to help push forward the dialogue mechanisms so that a favourable outcome can be reach for the benefit of all sides.