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The pressure on the Churches of Israel has reached an alarming level.

On Wednesday, March 12 a bill was introduced and is being fast-tracked in the Knesset that will disproportionately impact the Churches. The bill is set for discussion on Wednesday, March 19, subsequent to which only two hearings are required before a vote.

The fair leasing bill proposes significant changes to long-term lease agreements, effectively restricting the Churches ability to negotiate new leases or sell properties to fund or maintain church-owned assets and activities. The bill represents a form of legal and financial pressure that diminishes the Churches autonomy and ability to function.

This bill – combined with the seemingly coordinated attack by several municipalities to compel the Christian Churches to pay millions in alleged municipal taxes through court proceedings, freezing bank accounts, withholding annual school funds, and issuing foreclosure orders – harkens back to the conditions, albeit much expanded, that forced the closure of the Holy Sepulchre in 2018.

These actions are contrary to historical and contemporary agreements that provide the Christian Churches with a special legal and tax status. Moreover, they contradict 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.

Now, as then, the Churches are collectively facing increased threats to their presence, properties, and ability to function, and they are collectively calling on Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and other in the federal government to immediately intervene. This is evidenced by their joint response to the recent foreclosure order against the Orthodox Armenian Patriarchate by the municipality of Jerusalem on properties they have safeguarded for centuries (see attached).

So too, we appeal to you on behalf of the Franciscans, to vocalize your support for the Christian Churches in Israel. It is imperative that Prime Minister Netanyahu intervene as before and suspend the legal proceedings and new bill, and re-establish a special committee to identify a sustainable resolution.

Please consider (1) sending a letter to the State Department urging them to engage the Government of Israel on this critical issue for both our countries (see attached), (2) calling the State Department requesting this engagement, and/or (3) engaging the Government of Israel directly.

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.



PATRIARCHS AND HEADS OF LOCAL CHURCHES OF JERUSALEM

Patriarchs and Heads of Churches in Jerusalem Condemn Unjust Foreclosure Against Armenian Patriarchate, Urge Immediate Intervention Jerusalem – February 19, 2025

"Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they shall be filled."
(Matthew 5:6)

With great concern, we, the Patriarchs and Heads of the Churches in Jerusalem, stand in steadfast solidarity with the Orthodox Armenian Patriarchate in Jerusalem in its pursuit of justice against an unjust foreclosure order issued by the Municipality of Jerusalem. The actions taken against the Arminian Patriarchate, based on an unverified and exorbitant Arnona Tax debt, are legally dubious and morally unacceptable.

It is inconceivable that Christian institutions, whose mission for centuries has been to safeguard faith, serve communities, and preserve the sacred heritage of the Holy Land, should now face the threat of property seizure under Israeli administrative measures that disregard due process. Particularly alarming is the municipality's attempt to enforce a debt determination without judicial scrutiny, and in defiance of the governmental committee established to negotiate such matters in good faith. This reckless move jeopardizes the Orthodox Armenian Patriarchate and sets a perilous precedent that could imperil Christian institutions throughout the Holy Land.

This action undermines the freedom of religion, which is the foundation of all other rights, since through a confiscation of assets, attempts to the right of existence of the Orthodox Armenian Church, depriving it of the necessary economic resources to live and operate and depriving the local Armenian people of the pastoral care of their Church.

"If one member suffers, all suffer together" (1 Corinthians 12:26). The targeting of one Church is an assault on all, and we cannot remain silent while the foundations of our Christian witness in the land of Christ's ministry are shaken. We call upon Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, Interior Minister Moshe Arbel, and Minister Tzachi Hanegbi to immediately intervene, freeze all foreclosure proceedings, and ensure that negotiations resume within the above-mentioned governmental committee in order to reach to an amicable solution regarding this issue in the spirit of justice.

May righteousness prevail, and may the Holy Land remain a beacon of faith for generations to come.

+The Patriarchs and Heads of the Churches in Jerusalem+

We write to you regarding an issue that gravely threatens the enduring presence of Christianity in the Holy Land.

In March 2025, a fair leasing bill was introduced and is being fast-tracked in the Knesset that will disproportionately impact the Christian Churches in Israel. The bill proposes significant changes to long-term lease agreements, effectively restricting the Churches ability to negotiate new leases or sell properties to fund or maintain church-owned assets and activities. It represents a form of legal and financial pressure that diminishes the Churches autonomy and ability to function.

In addition, several municipalities in Israel have initiated legal actions against the Christian Churches in Israel, demanding millions in municipal taxes. These actions include court proceedings, frozen bank accounts, withheld essential annual school funds, and foreclosure orders on church properties.

These proceedings are contrary to the status quo and to historical and contemporary agreements that provide the Christian Churches in Israel with a special legal and tax status. The number and potential magnitude of the proceedings are an unprecedented escalation against the small population of nearly two percent of Christians and the greater Christian presence in Israel.

The special status allows the Christian Churches in Israel to invest in and serve the local Christian and broader communities through churches, eldercare, hospitals, schools, and more. Without the exemptions, these social services and the people they serve are gravely compromised. Further, it allows for the Christian Churches in Israel to care for the many Holy sites in Israel that are offered, with few exceptions, free of charge to pilgrims.

In 2018, direct engagement by the US Government, other governments, and religious leaders with the Government of Israel helped encourage Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu to intervene to suspend adverse legislation and to suspend the threat of municipal taxes. The Prime Minister also established a special committee headed by then Minister of Regional Cooperation Tzachi Hanegbi to formulate a sustainable resolution. The committee, however, did not progress.

We urge the US Government to work with the Government of Israel, as before, to resolve this issue now and in the long-term. The enduring presence of Christianity in Israel has long been a priority of the Government of Israel and significant to the millions of Christian pilgrims that visit annually from the United States and around the world during times of peace.

Thank you for your consideration.