

October 14, 2025

DISSEMINATION BY THE LIVINGSTON GROUP, LLC

FARA Registration #6344

The Livingston Group (TLG) represents the Commissariat of the Holy Land for the USA (Commissariat) – an extension of the Franciscan Custody of the Holy Land (Custody) in Jerusalem, which cares for the Christian people and holy places throughout Israel.

Fr. Francesco Ielpo will be in Washington, DC for the first time as the new head of the Custody from Tuesday, October 28 through Friday, October 31. We hope to find a mutually agreeable time to introduce him to you and to discuss an issue of mutual concern.

Since October 2023, the people and State of Israel have faced extraordinary challenges and uncertainty because of terrorism and war. It is heartening that an agreement has been reached and a ceasefire initiated.

Amidst this time of crisis, several municipalities initiated legal proceedings against the Custody and other Christian Churches in Israel for millions in alleged municipal taxes (arnona). The municipalities also began freezing and seizing of bank accounts, withholding of annual school funds, and issuing foreclosure orders.

These actions are contrary to historical and contemporary agreements that provide the Christian Churches with a special legal and tax status. A status that the Christian Churches to invest in services that benefit society – churches, eldercare, hospitals, schools, 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, compromising these social services and harming the Christian and other populations that rely on them.

These actions also contradict the status quo which dictates, among other things, that the Holy See and the State of Israel negotiate a comprehensive agreement on disputed issues such as the arnona and that municipalities stay the enforcement of the arnona.

While the pressure of municipal taxes is not new, this continued escalation represents an unprecedented, coordinated attack on the Christian presence in the Holy Land. The Christian Churches have appealed to Prime Minister Netanyahu to intervene as before and suspend the legal proceedings, and to re-establish a special committee to identify a sustainable resolution (see attached enclosures).

We are grateful for the engagement of the US Government on this issue – to include the Office of International Religious Freedom and the US Embassy in Israel – which recently resulted in a letter from Prime Minister Netanyahu to the municipalities of concern. Despite

his appeal that they examine a way to refrain from continuing the process of debt collection, the municipalities are continuing their efforts to collect the arnona.

It is important for the US Government and Government of Israel, as committed partners, continue to engage on, if not elevate, issues of mutual and global concern such as this.

Thank you, for your consideration of our meeting request.

Additional Background

Pressure on the Christian Churches in Israel has reached an alarming level.

In March 2025, a bill was introduced and is being fast-tracked in the Knesset that will disproportionately impact the Churches.

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 a seemingly coordinated attack by several municipalities to compel the Churches to pay millions in alleged municipal taxes through court proceedings, freezing and seizing 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 others in the federal government to immediately intervene.

On behalf of the Churches, the Franciscans are appealing for US officials and the public to vocalize support for the Christian Churches in Israel. It is imperative that Prime Minister Netanyahu intervene as before and suspend the legal proceedings and bill, and re-establish a special committee to identify a sustainable resolution.

The United States and Israel are committed partners. As such, it is important to engage on issues of mutual and global interest like the enduring Christian presence in the Holy Land.

Their presence can play a positive, practical role in ensuring stability in Israel and the region.

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.

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.

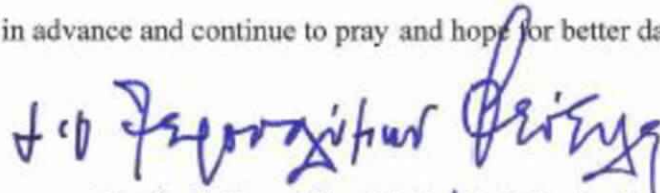
We are aware of your views and statements on the need to respect Christian community, as you stated in 2018 when you ordered the suspension of collection proceedings against churches. We appreciate and value your attitude toward us in Israel. Once again, we find ourselves needing to call upon the government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

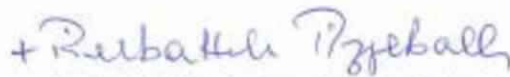
We thank you in advance and continue to pray and hope for better days for all of us.



+Patriarch Theophilos III, Greek Orthodox Patriarchate



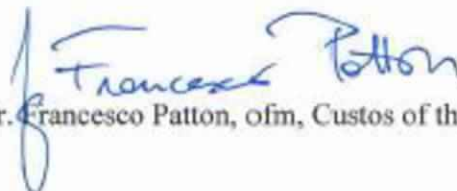
+Patriarch Nourhan Manougian, Armenian Apostolic Orthodox Patriarchate



+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.