

## **A press conference in front of the Church of the Holy Sepulcher today: Ambassador Kassissieh calls on the world to move**

Ambassador of the State of Palestine to the Vatican Issa Kassissieh stated that it is clear that there is an escalation by the right-wing Israeli government to undermine and to end the Christian presence in the Holy City of Jerusalem through its policies aiming at controlling the properties and buildings of the churches especially by Israeli settlers or through the imposition of taxes on the real estate and property of churches by the so-called Jerusalem municipality. According to Ambassador Kassissieh the Israeli practices are in violation of the historical and legal status quo of Jerusalem. The Israeli authorities, he added, have exceeded the red lines by freezing the accounts of churches in banks. The latest of these policies is the passing of the Church Lands Bill in the Israeli Knesset which allows the Israeli government to confiscate and administer land, property and endowments of the Church.

Ambassador Kassissieh stated the recent Israeli measures aimed at Christian presence in the Holy Land are a flagrant breach of the statute quo, which regulates relations between civil and ecclesiastical authorities since 1757. This was confirmed by the Treaty of Paris of 1856 and the Berlin Treaty of 1878. Also the Commission on the Truth of Palestine in 1949 reaffirms the special status of the Holy Places. In addition, the Partition Resolution of 1947 states that no party should prejudice the status quo of the holy places. In this context, Ambassador Kassissieh said that on 8 November 1946, the Israeli delegate to the United Nations handed over a letter expressing his government's commitment to preserve and maintain the status of holy sites.

The Basic Bilateral Agreement between the Holy See and the State of Israel in 1993 included an affirmation of their commitment under Article 4 (1) to respect the historical and legal status of the Holy Places.

Ambassador Kassissieh said the Security Council resolutions related to Jerusalem, including Security Council Resolutions 476, 478, 1515 and 2334, and other resolutions of the UN General Assembly, all affirm the invalidity of the decisions and actions of Israel, the occupying power, regarding Jerusalem.

On 7 September 2017, the Heads of Churches in the Holy Land expressed their rejection of any measures that undermine the status quo in Jerusalem and any attempts to legitimize illegal actions and policies through the confiscation and disposal of church property. They issued a statement in July 2017, during the events of the Haram al-Sharif expressing their deep concern about Israel's attempts to change the historical and legal status of the holy city.

The last statement issued by the Heads of the Churches on 14 February 2018 renewed their rejection of the measures taken by the Israeli municipality of Jerusalem to impose taxes on the churches and their institutions. They affirmed that such measures are illegal and constitute a great threat and challenge to Christian presence. They reminded of their great contribution to the service of the community through their projects in various sectors including health, education. Such contribution is one of the main sources of income for civil authorities.

Palestinian Ambassador to the Vatican Issa Kassissieh called on the countries of the world, especially the Vatican and the countries that consider themselves the custodians of the Holy Places since the Ottoman era and other churches in the world, to put an end to the unilateral and illegal policies of the Israeli government.

The Israeli escalation was triggered by the declaration of US President Trump on 6 December 2017 and his recognition of Jerusalem the capital of Israel, in violation of the obligations of previous US administrations and international legitimacy.