

# PALESTINE AND THE HOLY SEE FOR HOPE DIGNITY AND PEACE



دولة فلسطين  
STATE OF PALESTINE

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The Higher Presidential Committee for Church Affairs in coordination  
with the Embassy of the State of Palestine to the Holy See

## *Your Holiness,*

The relationship between the Holy See and the State of Palestine transcends the official diplomatic relations between any two political entities. It is a relation rooted in the spiritual dimension which bonds Palestine, the birthplace of Jesus, with the Catholic faithful worldwide and reinforced by the shared values of humility, love, and peace.

The message of the Prince of Peace, Jesus, spread to the world from a humble manger in Bethlehem, Palestine. His message of humility, peace, love, and sacrifice, is an intrinsic component of the Palestinian national identity. We, the Palestinian people, have been messengers of peace and cooperation since time immemorial. Our history, though wrought with wars, injustice and attempts of foreign domination, has not changed the basic Palestinian character, which seeks peace, prosperity and cooperation and resists violence, hate, and the indignities of war. It has been my honor and privilege, as the President of the State of Palestine, to oversee the signing of an historic agreement with the Holy See, one that is unprecedented in scope and depth in the Middle East and beyond. This agreement embodies our shared values and legislates the reality of cooperation, solidarity, and harmony that we wish for all peoples and all faiths. Palestine, the birthplace of peace, the most noble of messages, shall remain a minaret of freedom of consciousness, thought, and belief. It shall continue to shine hope in humanity through the darkness of injustice and despite the indignities of conflict.

## *Your Holiness,*

Just as the message and teachings of Jesus, Peace be Upon Him, is part of the Palestinian character, Palestinian Christians have always been and shall remain an indispensable part of the Palestinian social fabric. Their contributions to our national struggle for freedom and justice as well as all fields in society, including education, civil service, and philanthropy, have left an indelible print on our history and social development.

Together, we, the sons and daughters of this tormented yet Holy Land, have journeyed as one in the long and arduous road to justice, freedom, and peace, which sadly remain elusive. Our rich tapestry of faith has empowered us to hold on to hope in a future befitting of our homeland and deserving of our nation. Together, we shall continue, united and steadfast towards our date with freedom, which is long overdue. Together, we shall soon celebrate, as one, the materialization of the independent, viable, and sovereign state of Palestine, with Jerusalem as its capital, where we shall realize our potential as a people and affirm Palestine as the birthplace of peace and the cradle of hope, dialogue, and dignity.

## *Your Holiness,*

I am also personally honored to have had the privilege to spend time with Your Holiness praying for peace and working together for justice and solidarity in Palestine and beyond. Your personal engagement and sincere commitment to the universal cause of justice and coexistence has had a deep impact on me personally and my people.

I humbly ask you to keep Palestine in your solemn prayers and to continue supporting the just cause of my people for freedom and peace. Two years ago, we prayed together for peace in the Holy Land, and for greater understanding as a bridge that can overcome conflict and mistrust. I have dedicated my life to this cause: the pursuit of peace through love and resilience and the rejection of anger and violence. With humility and dignity, my people shall continue to mold hope out of pain and charge forward towards a future of peace, armed with unbreakable faith in the certainty of justice and the power of right over the might of evil.

Allow me to conclude by renewing Palestine's commitment to our continued cooperation and collaboration for the cause of justice and peace everywhere. Allow me also to renew our commitment to continue upholding the values of the Holy Land and to ensure that it forever remains a haven for the faithful and a center for understanding and cooperation among them. Finally, please accept this book as a testament to the special bond between the Holy See and Palestine as well as our joint pursuit of peace, justice, and dignity for all.

Humbly,  
Mahmoud Abbas

President of the State of Palestine  
President of the Palestine Liberation Organization  
President of the Palestinian National Authority



## Political Engagement



In 1982, His Holiness Pope John Paul II received the late President Yasser Arafat for the first time. The private audience was an important turning point in Palestine-Vatican relations, with the Holy See taking a pioneering role in recognizing the PLO's sincere efforts to achieve justice and peace in the Middle East.

The Holy See's explicit support for Palestinian self-determination was further reiterated in the 1984 papal document *Redemptionis Anno*, which addressed the Vatican's concern over the continued injustice in the Middle East at length. In it, His Holiness Pope Paul II expressed concern over the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and its harsh reflections on the daily lives of Palestinians. He also clearly expressed support for the Palestinian people's inalienable right to self-determination:

*"The Palestinian people, who find their historical roots in that land and who for decades have been dispersed, have the natural right in justice to find once more a homeland and to be able to live in peace and tranquility with the other peoples of the area."*<sup>12</sup>

By 1988, His Holiness Pope John Paul II had received the late President Yasser Arafat a second time, reiterating his support for peace through dialogue and a solution guaranteeing the rights of the Palestinian people.



Historic meeting between H.H. Pope John Paul II and late President Yasser Arafat, Vatican City, Holy See - 23/12/1988 (Gensio Fotografico - L'Osservatore Romano)



H.H. Pope Benedict XVI delivering speech during reception by President Mahmoud Abbas at the Presidential Compound, Bethlehem, Palestine - 13/05/2009 (Servizio Fotografico - L'Osservatore Romano)



President Mahmoud Abbas greeting H.H. Pope Benedict XVI at the Presidential Compound, Bethlehem, Palestine - 13/05/2009 (Servizio Fotografico - L'Osservatore Romano)



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## Restoration Work at the Nativity Church

In 2009, the Presidential Committee for the Restoration of the Nativity Church was established by decree with the agreement of the three churches overseeing the Nativity. It was charged with carrying out a scientific restoration program of the Holy Church.

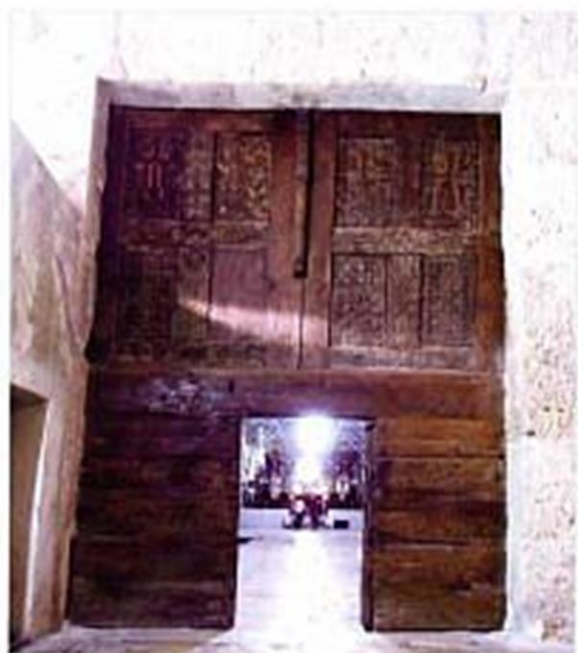
The Committee invited international bids for the assessment study and the establishment of the restoration program in August 2009, with bids made in December 2009. Upon completion of the assessment, the Presidential Committee worked on securing the necessary funds for the work and phase One of the restoration began in September 2013.

The restoration effort is the biggest the Nativity Church has ever undergone throughout its rich history. It was also urgently needed. Restoration work will continue until all needed restoration work is successfully concluded.

With the generous contributions of States, including the State of Palestine and the Holy See, as well as individual donors, the Committee has overseen the restoration of several key parts of the Holy Church, including its dilapidated roof and wooden structures, the Narthex, the Narthex eastern wooden door and the Basilica doors. These successful restoration efforts were significant, especially given that they addressed the main structural elements at risk, which led UNESCO to inscribe the Church in the list of World Heritage Sites under threat in 2011.

Restoration work on the stone facades and internal wall plasters has also commenced. But perhaps the most visible and exciting result of the restoration efforts thus far for the tens of thousands of faithful who visit the Nativity every year is the restoration of the wall mosaic, which was completed in 2016. The work has uncovered a new fragment depicting an angel on the north wall between the fourth and the fifth window. Work is also underway to restore the floor mosaic.

The Grotto, the holiest place in the church, located in the lower level under the altar and housing the star that identifies the exact birth location, will be restored directly by the Churches in coordination with the Presidential Committee's construction management team. The decision to defer to the Churches was taken in line with the State of Palestine's commitment to respect and preserve the Status Quo.







His Excellency Ambassador Issa Kassassieh during credentials ceremony, Vatican City, Holy See - 12/12/2013 (Servizio Fotografico - L'Osservatore Romano)

On 12 December 2013, Mr. Issa Kassassieh became the first Palestinian Ambassador to submit his credentials to His Holiness Pope Francis during an official ceremony of accepting credentials for Ambassadors of other states. The ceremony reflected the progress achieved in the bilateral consultations to reach a comprehensive agreement between the Holy See and the State of Palestine.

Ambassador Kassassieh is Palestine's third representative to the Vatican. He was preceded by the late Shawqi Armali and Dr. Afif Safieh, who was appointed as Palestine's first Ambassador to the Holy See upon signing the Basic Agreement in 2000.



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His Excellency Ambassador Issa Kassassieh submits credentials to H.H. Pope Francis, Vatican City, Holy See - 12/12/2013 (Servizio Fotografico - L'Osservatore Romano)









