# Jerusalem's Church of the Holy Sepulchre Closes Doors to Protest New Tax Policies

Custodians representing the Roman Catholic, Greek Orthodox, and Armenian Apostolic churches, who share custody of the ancient Church of the Holy Sepulchre in Jerusalem (shown), closed the church on February 25 to protest a new policy by the Jerusalem municipality designed to collect taxes on church properties in the city.

The ancient church has been held sacred by Christians for centuries because it was built over the two holiest sites in Christianity: the site where Jesus was crucified, known as "Calvary" or "Golgotha," and the empty tomb where the body of Jesus was placed after His crucifixion and from which He resurrected from the dead.

In addition to the change in the municipal tax code, the church closure was also done to protest legislation initiated by MK (Member of the Knesset) Rachel Azaria (Kulanu Party) that would allow the state to expropriate land in Jerusalem sold by churches to private real estate firms in recent years. "This abhorrent bill … if approved, would make the expropriation of the lands of churches possible," read a joint statement released by Theophilos III, the Patriarch of the Orthodox Church of Jerusalem; Fr. Francesco Patton, the Catholic Custos for the Holy Land; and Nourhan Manougian, the Armenian (Apostolic Church) Patriarch of Jerusalem.

MK Azaria said in response to the news of the church's closing that she "understands that the church is being pressured, but their land will remain theirs — no one wants to take it from them, ever. My bill is about what happens when the rights are sold to a third side." Azaria continued: "The low prices at which entire neighborhoods were sold shows that it was a speculative deal. In this situation, the patriarchate is irrelevant, because it's land sold to private builders."

The churches are reportedly more worried about the legislation than the new taxes because it effectively would stop Christian churches from selling land to private individuals because people won't buy land that they know can be taken by the government on a whim.

Azaria, who used to be Jerusalem's deputy mayor and also previously served as a member of the Jerusalem City Council, accused the current mayor, Nir Barkat, of "creating a crisis instead of solving it [and] creating an unnecessary diplomatic crisis."

Azaria also said that she plans to propose a bill exempting churches from municipal taxes, like other religious institutions. "The trick the [Jerusalem] mayor is pulling is ugly," she asserted.

After a news conference held on February 25, the Israeli parliament agreed to hold off discussing the legislation proposed by Azaria to "ease tensions with church leaders in Jerusalem and find a compromise." After the move by the church leaders to close the Church of the Holy Sepulchre, an Israeli cabinet committee delayed by a week its scheduled consideration of the bill proposed by Azaria.

The church leaders also weighed in strongly against Jerusalem's new tax policy, saying: "This reminds us all of laws of a similar nature which were enacted against the Jews during dark periods in Europe."

Mayor Barkat responded to the voices protesting the tax changes on Twitter, saying it was illogical to expect that church-owned commercial property, including hotels and retail businesses, would continue to enjoy tax-exempt status. "Let me make it clear: we are not talking about houses of worship, [which] will still be exempt from property tax, according to law," he wrote.

Reuters reported that pilgrims visiting the Holy Land voiced their disappointment at finding the doors of the Church of the Holy Sepulchre locked. "I am very upset. It's my first time here and I made a big effort to get here and now I find it closed," said Marine Domenech from Lille, France.

The *Washington Post* reported that the leaders of the Greek Orthodox, Catholic, and Armenian churches held a news conference in front of the ancient church and in a joint statement accused Israel of waging a "systematic campaign against the churches and the Christian community in the Holy Land, in flagrant violation of the existing status quo."

"Recently, this systematic and offensive campaign has reached an unprecedented level as the Jerusalem municipality issued scandalous collection notices and orders of seizure of Church assets, properties and bank accounts for alleged debts of punitive municipal taxes," wrote the church leaders.

The religious leaders asserted that the proposed changes in Jerusalem's and Israel's tax policies violated agreements and international obligations made by Israel toward the church and that it "seems as an attempt to weaken the Christian presence in Jerusalem."

Despite those charges, it appears that Israel's motivation in changing its tax laws is primarily economic, rather than based on religious differences.

The *Post* cited Barkat's statement that the new taxation policies would not affect the churches and would cover only properties belonging to church authorities that are used for commercial purposes. "In Jerusalem, all are equal under the law — Christians, Muslims, and Jews alike. The Church of the Holy Sepulchre — as is the case for all of Jerusalem's churches, synagogues, and mosques — is exempt from municipal taxes," the mayor said. However, Barkat said hotels and office spaces owned by the various churches "are not exempt from municipal taxes, regardless of their ownership."

During his December 6 speech announcing that the United States would move the U.S. embassy in Israel from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem and recognize Jerusalem as Israel's capital, President Trump praised Israel as a country where adherents of the world's three major monotheistic faiths enjoyed freedom of religion.

He added, "Over the past seven decades, the Israeli people have built a country where Jews, Muslims, and Christians, and people of all faiths are free to live and worship according to their conscience and according to their beliefs. Jerusalem is today, and must remain, a place where Jews pray at the Western Wall, where Christians walk the Stations of the Cross, and where Muslims worship at Al-Aqsa Mosque."

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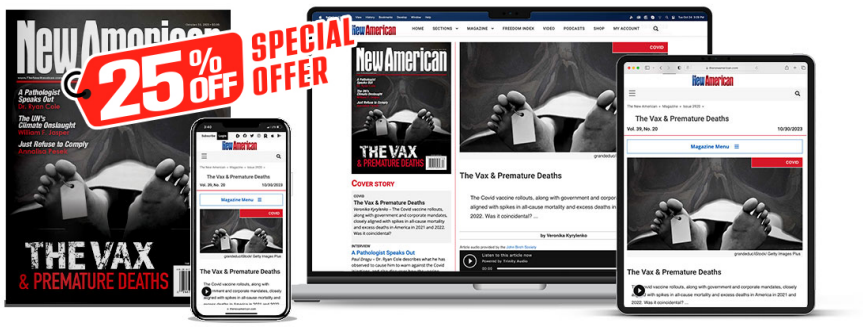


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