



For Immediate Release:

Churches for Middle East Peace (CMEP) Press Release Update: Church of the Holy Sepulchre Reopens: Threats Against the Christian Community Remain, Washington, D.C. - February, 28, 2018

Shortly following Churches for Middle East Peace's (CMEP) February 27, 2018 [Press Release](#), "*The Future of the Christian Church in the Holy Land in Peril*," the Israeli Government announced it had reached an agreement to temporarily postpone the planned collection of taxes on church properties not used as houses of worship; and to suspend consideration of a controversial Knesset bill dealing with leases and the sale of church lands.

While CMEP is grateful for the progress allowing the heads of Churches in charge of the Holy Sepulchre to reopen so that pilgrims have access to one of Christianity's holiest sites, we remain gravely concerned. We support and affirm the words of these [church leaders](#) and join them in offering our gratitude to all those who have worked tirelessly to uphold the Christian presence in Jerusalem and to defend the Status Quo."

The Status Quo, reflecting the just and fair treatment of churches in their relationship with Israel and governing authorities, is still under threat. In a [statement](#) issued by the Prime Minister's Office (PMO) of Israel, the following actions were communicated:

"As part of the discussion between the Prime Minister's Office and the Jerusalem Municipality regarding churches' municipal taxes, Prime Minister Netanyahu and Jerusalem Mayor Barkat have agreed that a professional team led by Minister [Tzachi] Hanegbi, including representatives of the Ministries of Finance, Foreign Affairs and the Interior and the Jerusalem Municipality, will formulate a solution to the issue of municipal taxes (which do not apply to houses of worship). The team will negotiate with the representatives of the churches to resolve the issue."

In addition, Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu announced his government would "freeze a controversial bill that recently spurred the crisis..." CMEP supports the halt on the "Bill of Church Lands" legislation which could allow for the seizure of contested church land. According to [Haaretz](#), the bill is unusual in terms of "Israeli jurisprudence because it applies retroactively to land sales that have been finalized. It limits the property rights of the churches and private firms that bought the land." According to [The Times of Israel](#), the bill would allow "the state to appropriate lands in Israel sold by churches to anonymous buyers since the start of the decade."

CMEP would support a complete and final resolution of these issues between the Heads of Communion of Churches in the Holy Land and Minister Hanegbi. However, the announcement today only indicated that a professional team would be formed to "examine the issues" and to "formulate a solution." We are

grateful that all “legislative activity on the matter will be suspended” during this time of seeking to determine a final resolution. CMEP looks forward to church leaders playing a central role in helping these issues come to a positive outcome.

The recent press release from the Israeli Prime Minister’s Office also touted “believers of all faiths have full freedom of religion and worship” within Israel. Religious freedom within the green line in Israel is something that should be lauded. However, this statement ignores that these opportunities to worship are often not extended to Palestinian Christians (and Muslims) who live in the West Bank and must receive permits that are difficult, if not impossible, to obtain in order to be able to travel to Jerusalem and other Holy Sites in Israel.

While CMEP remains grateful the **Church of the Holy Sepulchre has reopened, threats against the Christian community in Israel and the occupied Palestinian territories remain.** We are calling on American Christians, the Christian community around the world, and other people of faith to contact their elected officials and to ask them to promote a shared Jerusalem by Palestinians and Israelis, as well as full access to the Holy Sites of the three religious communities - Jews, Christians, and Muslims - and by all who call them holy.

Contact:
Katie McRoberts
katie@cmep.org
Ph. 202-543-1222

###

Formed in 1984, [Churches for Middle East Peace](#) is a [coalition of 27 national church denominations and organizations](#), including Catholic, Orthodox and Protestant traditions. It works to encourage U.S. government policies that actively promote a just, lasting and comprehensive resolution of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, ensuring security, human rights and religious freedom for all people of the region. [Click here to unsubscribe.](#)

media@cmep.org | 202-543-1222 | Fax 202-543-5025
110 Maryland Avenue NE | Suite 311 | Washington, DC 20002

