



The Higher Presidential Committee of Churches Affairs



In light of rising conflicts in the Middle East and their destabilizing regional effects as well as the decrease in Palestine's Christian population due to the policies of the Israeli occupation, President Mahmoud Abbas formed the Higher Presidential Committee of Churches Affairs in Palestine (HCC) by a presidential decree issued on May 24, 2012. The committee, which is the first of its kind in the region, was mandated to preserve and protect the indigenous Christian presence in Palestine, the birthplace of Christ, as well as protect and promote the legal rights and properties of Christian institutions and places of worship, including schools and community centers.

The committee members are representatives of several ministries and municipalities working together to advance the principle of full equality for all citizens under the law. The committee performs its responsibilities in accordance with the directives of the Palestinian president and in cooperation with official institutions, and it undertakes these tasks at the local, regional, and international levels.

The committee's main goal is to curb the worrisome phenomenon of Christian emigration from Palestine because of the Israeli occupation and its pervasive violations of the human rights of Palestinians, including the construction of the separation wall that severely restricts the movement of Palestinians and chokes economic and social life in various key cities such as Jerusalem and Bethlehem. To that end, the committee works to preserve the Christian heritage and presence in the Holy Land through protecting Christian property as well as cultural, community, and religious institutions from Israel's relentless campaign of illegal expropriation. It also works at the national, regional, and international levels to raise awareness about the history of Christianity in Palestine and the Middle East and its role in the social fiber and cultural heritage of Palestinian national identity, specifically the region's cultural heritage at large. Locally, the committee also cooperates with the Ministry of Education to review the Palestinian curriculum and ensure that it accurately and sufficiently reflects these historical and cultural facts.

In order to reduce and eventually halt emigration, the HCC is promoting educational, housing, and medical projects as well as creating job opportunities for Palestinian Christians. Several housing projects have recently been established in the Bethlehem governorate for the local Christian communities with the help and support of the HCC. The committee also funded more than 50 restoration projects for churches and social centers that

has guaranteed protection of Muslim and Christian holy sites in Palestine for nearly two centuries. This historical arrangement also guarantees the exemption of churches and their institutions, including schools, social centers, hospitals, and health clinics, from paying taxes. By imposing taxes, Israel threatens to close down these institutions, thus endangering the continued presence of Palestine's indigenous Christian population



Lighting the 2019 Christmas tree in Jerusalem.

serve the community, in addition to supporting Christian scout groups.

The committee also works to alleviate the devastating impact of Israel's colonial occupation on the lives, livelihoods, and rights of Palestinian Christians. This includes the unprecedented isolation of Jerusalem from the rest of the occupied Palestinian territory, which has torn families apart, affected economic activity, and struck at the heart of Palestinians' right to freedom of worship in a city that is central to their faiths.

Israeli practices are eroding the Status Quo, the historical arrangement that

in Jerusalem and by extension its continued presence in the Holy Land, which led to the temporary closure of the Holy Sepulcher Church in Jerusalem, Christianity's holiest site, to protest serious violations of church property rights.

Other damaging practices that strike at the heart of continued Palestinian Christian presence are legally dubious activities and outright theft of property at Jaffa Gate, the main entrance to the Christian Quarter in Jerusalem's Old City. In response to these alarming actions, which enjoy the full backing of the Israeli government and judiciary,

the HCC is working with community leaders to protect Palestinian Christian properties in Jerusalem. It is also lobbying the international community, particularly countries that define themselves as historical protectors of holy places in Jerusalem, to take concrete measures that would confront these illegal measures.

In this context, the committee decided to form the Jerusalem Committee to follow up on all the cases related to the Christian community in Jerusalem. Most importantly, this committee follows up on the breaches of the historical Status Quo and the seizure of properties that belong to the Greek Orthodox Church in Jerusalem's Christian Quarter by Israeli settler groups.

The HCC is also very active locally, regionally, and internationally in increasing awareness about the escalating Israeli violations against the Palestinian people and the targeting of the Christian presence in Palestine, especially in Jerusalem. In this context, the committee confronts Israeli actions and narratives that misleadingly portray the conflict as being a religious conflict between Jews and Muslims. To this end, the committee organizes many meetings throughout the world, including the United States, Europe, and Latin America, to highlight these attempts to obscure the fact that this conflict is political in nature and that it is perpetuated by Israel's refusal to end its colonial regime and its determination to deprive the Palestinian people of their inalienable rights to self-determination and freedom.

These efforts expand the solidarity base in favor of the Palestinian cause and aid in confronting Israel's plan to alter and permanently change the demographic and cultural identity of Palestine, especially in Jerusalem. They also facilitate networking among churches and build bridges of understanding and cooperation between partners



Members of the Higher Presidential Committee of Churches Affairs in Palestine along with the Custodians of the Holy Land meeting President Mahmoud Abbas.

committed to universal human rights as well as to the Christian values in order to advance the cause of Palestinian freedom.

In addition to raising awareness, the committee works tirelessly to recover properties of the Church Endowment that the Israeli occupying power and settlers seek to confiscate and possess. In his most recent visit to Rome in November, Dr. Ramzi Khoury, head of the HCC, met with His Holiness Pope Francis and conveyed President Mahmoud Abbas' grave concern for the lands confiscated in the Cremisan Valley and the properties of the Greek Orthodox Church seized by Israeli settlers. Dr. Khoury also discussed with His Holiness the committee's efforts to recover these properties and assist Palestinian churches in protecting them. This message was warmly received by

His Holiness, who affirmed the Holy See's principled position in support of the preservation and protection of Palestinian Christians and ensuring their continued presence in Palestine, as well as its support of their rights in line with international law.

To advance its stated goals and fulfill its mandate, the HCC also assists the State of Palestine's efforts at the multilateral level. This has included Palestine's success at UNESCO to inscribe the Church of the Nativity and Pilgrimage Route on the World Heritage List. The site was recently removed from the List of World Heritage under Threat thanks to the Palestinian-led efforts of restoration and preservation. The HCC has also participated in lobbying partners and allies in countries such as Brazil to prevent governments from taking the grave and illegal step of

transferring their embassies from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem.

The HCC is a sincere and organic reflection of Palestine's culture and national identity as well as its invaluable contribution to humanity as a beacon of religious tolerance and brotherhood. The committee's work and mandate have served as an inspiration throughout the region and a sign of hope that Palestine's noble message of peace, shared values, and freedom can and must guide the region to a brighter, more peaceful and hopeful future. This is a source of enormous pride for all the members and partners of the HCC team.