

Foreign Affairs Committee

Oral evidence: Jerusalem Holy Places, HC 494

Monday 29 June 2026

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Members present: Emily Thornberry (Chair); Fleur Anderson; Edward Morello.

Questions 1-36

Witnesses

I: Theophilos III, Patriarch, Greek Orthodox Church of Jerusalem, and Hosam Elias Naoum, Archbishop, Episcopal Diocese of Jerusalem.

Examination of witnesses

Witnesses: Theophilos III and Hosam Elias Naoum.

Chair: Last year, this Committee published a report on the Israel-Palestine conflict. We will be seeing the Government soon, to discuss what updates they can give us since our report. Today, we want to consider a specific aspect of relations between communities in Jerusalem. I am very grateful to our witnesses for joining us today on Zoom. Would you like to introduce yourselves for the record, beginning with Your Grace the Archbishop?

Hosam Elias Naoum: Hello and thank you very much. My name is Hosam. I am the Anglican Archbishop in Jerusalem and I am really delighted to join you online today.

Chair: And Your Beatitude, could you introduce yourself, please?

Theophilos III: Thank you for the invitation. I am the Greek Orthodox Patriarch of Jerusalem and I am working together with Archbishop Hosam here in Jerusalem.

Q1 **Chair:** Perhaps I can begin with the archbishop. Could you give us a general background to the controversies around the holy places in Jerusalem? I think that at the moment there is something called the Status Quo. Could you tell us how that originated?

Hosam Elias Naoum: In terms of the background to the situation in Jerusalem, we know that Jerusalem has a very long history. It goes back 2,000 years as Christian-Jewish, and then 14 centuries as Jewish, Christian and Muslim together in the holy city. The Status Quo developed over the years. We don't talk about one Status Quo. It has been developing, depending on who was ruling in the city. It could refer to different things. The Status Quo for the Churches in Jerusalem is one thing, and the status quo for Jerusalem as a whole is another. I think today we will be focusing more on the status quo regarding Jerusalem as a whole, and one specific part of that would be the existing reality, which is the Status Quo of the holy sites and mainly what you refer to as Temple Mount/al-Haram al-Sharif, which contains the al-Aqsa/Dome of the Rock area of Jerusalem in the Old City. Included in that is the custodianship of the Hashemite Kingdom over holy sites, both Christian and Muslim. That is a brief answer to your question.

Q2 **Chair:** Would you be kind enough, for those who may be watching and who may not know what the holy sites are, to tell us the most important ones—I know there are many—and explain why they are important to the different religions?

Hosam Elias Naoum: First and foremost, the Holy Sepulchre is one. Of course, His Beatitude is with us, and he can certainly say more about that than I can, being an Anglican who goes only a few years back. Then we



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have the Haram al-Sharif—al-Aqsa mosque. That is the Muslim holy site in Jerusalem. It is an area of conflict, as we know. Part of the controversy and the conflict that we witness is people trying to claim jurisdiction over the same area. Hence we have all the conflicts happening there. As we know, some people call it the Temple Mount and others call it Haram al-Sharif; the use of terminology expresses a conflict itself.

Q3 **Chair:** It is the third most holy site in Islam. Can you explain why it is so important for Islam?

Hosam Elias Naoum: Within the Islamic tradition, we know that two places are holy: one in Medina and one in Mecca, in Saudi Arabia. Then the third would be al-Aqsa mosque. To translate the Arabic into English, it means “the furthest”; it is the far mosque, in Jerusalem. Actually, before the two holy sites in Saudi Arabia, al-Aqsa was the first direction of prayer, before even Mecca itself. That is why it has great significance to Islam, because it is regarded as the first direction of prayer, before even Mecca.

Q4 **Chair:** For Jews, the area is important because of the Wailing Wall. Will you explain that? I am sorry, but I think we should not make any assumptions about how much people know.

Hosam Elias Naoum: Indeed. The Western Wall is, exactly, another holy site. It is a holy site for the Jewish people. Next to it is the plaza that we all know is called the Wailing Wall. For the record, again, Muslims call it the wall of Buraq, which is the creature that transported Prophet Mohammed from Mecca to Jerusalem, as it is in the Quran, and hence it is another place of jurisdiction—to put it more politely. It is true that we have the three most holy sites in Jerusalem, as existing today: the Western Wall, al-Aqsa and Haram al-Sharif, and the Holy Sepulchre.

Q5 **Chair:** Your Beatitude, would you mind giving us a description of the importance of the Christian sites in Jerusalem?

Theophilos III: As Archbishop Hosam said, Jerusalem itself, especially the Old City, within the walls and outside the walls, is considered to be a holy place, and it is equally holy and sacred to Judaism, to Christianity and of course to Islam. Why to Islam? Because when Muslims came over here during the seventh century, they did not have holy places; they just endorsed the Judeo-Christian holy places. Since that time, there has been established the so-called Status Quo of the holy places or holy sites. Today, there is an attempt from radical groups—not the Israeli Government, but radical groups—trying by all means to change this Status Quo. That is our main concern. I always quote former President of Israel Mr Rivlin, who asked what Jerusalem would have been without this special tapestry—this multi-ethnic, multicultural and multi-religious character.

Q6 **Chair:** We will move on to that in a minute, but for people who may not know as much as perhaps they should, I wanted you to talk about the importance of the holy sites. Why is the Church of the Holy Sepulchre of such fundamental importance to Christianity?



Theophilos III: Because Jerusalem is connected to the crucifixion and burial of our Lord Jesus Christ. Jerusalem is the point of reference—the point that keeps the unity and brings together all Christians of all denominations. It is a very special place. Our ministry here is to keep the holy places, especially the Church of the Holy Sepulchre, accessible to everybody, without any discrimination whatever. That is why we try by all means to protect not only the Holy Sepulchre; as churches and communities, we also have some privileges—*ab antiquo*, as it is said—and we want to protect them too.

Today, there is a tendency by certain groups to sway control over the holy places, especially the Holy Sepulchre. We have a big problem, for example, with a holy day—the so-called Holy Fire on Great Saturday. It is causing a lot of problems for our Christians because they do not have access for this very special ceremony.

Q7 **Chair:** The Church of the Holy Sepulchre was the site where Jesus Christ was crucified—

Theophilos III: And buried.

Chair: And buried. And it is shared by Christians, and particularly the most ancient of the different Christian churches.

Theophilos III: It is served by the Orthodox, the Catholics, the Armenians, and the minor communities, such as the Copts, Syrians and Ethiopians.

There is a Status Quo that governs the prayers. In the past, there were conflicts, problems and disputes, but today, thank God, we have managed to be together, to have an understanding and to solve problems peacefully. We realised that we have a mission, and our mission is to represent the whole of Christendom and the whole world, of course. That is why we recently managed to restore the aedicule of the tomb of Jesus Christ and parts of the Holy Sepulchre.

Q8 **Chair:** Famously, one Palestinian family has been responsible for the keys to the church, and only that family has the responsibility of opening and locking the church. Is that right?

Theophilos III: Yes, they do participate in the opening and closing of the door, but there are many other doors. The ones in full charge of the Holy Sepulchre are the Greek Orthodox Patriarchate; we are connected, and we have many entrances. But the Muslims do participate, and that is very good for us. We respect it and we want it to continue, because it shows that Jerusalem is a place that unites everybody.

Q9 **Chair:** I hope I have covered the importance of it. Your Beatitude, could you explain the difficulties there have been in accessing the Church of the Holy Sepulchre recently, and why that has happened?

Theophilos III: One of them is access to the Holy Sepulchre on the day of the Holy Fire ceremony. Christians are allowed to come, but only



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outside the walls of the Old City, and they do not have access near to the Holy Sepulchre or inside it.

Q10 **Chair:** What day is the Holy Fire ceremony?

Theophilos III: It is every Easter. For Easter in Jerusalem, the Holy Fire ceremony is extremely fundamental, because without it, people do not feel that they can celebrate Easter. It is the only ceremony that brings together not only Christians, but Muslims, even many Jews, and many other people.

Q11 **Chair:** And Christians have not been allowed to go into Jerusalem for the Holy Fire ceremony?

Theophilos III: There are all sorts of restrictions and justifications. Our brother Archbishop Hosam can explain them to you.

Q12 **Chair:** How long has this been going on, Your Grace? I am in the dark about this. Would you mind explaining?

Hosam Elias Naoum: In terms of access and restrictions to the Holy Fire ceremony, as one can imagine, for over 1,700 years the Holy Fire ceremony has been taking place in that important venue, which is the heart of Jerusalem. For us as Christians, it is the heart of the whole world actually, because it is the place that gives us so much hope, and we are anchored to it. It is very symbolic and very holy for the whole of Christendom. The problem began—

Q13 **Chair:** When does it happen? I am trying to think when it happens in the story of Easter.

Hosam Elias Naoum: Basically, it is the Easter Vigil, which is the day before Easter Sunday. It is the Saturday immediately preceding Easter Sunday. A few years ago, we started experiencing some difficulty with the Israeli authorities and police. The justification is safety for those who are worshipping there, but we know that for hundreds of years we have never had any accidents.

Q14 **Chair:** What do you do with the fire?

Hosam Elias Naoum: On that day, His Beatitude Theophilos and any Patriarch at the time, goes into the tomb. Then there is the liturgy, in which the holy fire comes out from the tomb and goes into the community and the congregation there. From there, it goes to the whole world; it goes to Russia, to Jordan, to Spain—you name it. It is taken all over the world as a sign of the light of Christ bursting out of the tomb. That is basically what happens on that day.

Q15 **Chair:** It bursts out? So, it does not come out in candles? I have never seen this.

Hosam Elias Naoum: It comes out in candles, and from candles it goes into lanterns.

Q16 **Chair:** Okay. So it is not blasting through the window of the tomb?



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Hosam Elias Naoum: It could. There is a miracle recorded in the history of the Church where someone once prohibited the Patriarch from going in, and the holy fire came out through one of the pillars of the Holy Sepulchre; a crack at the entrance can still be seen today. That is more a spiritual, faith-based accident that happened.

The point is that we are expected to receive our faithful who want to come and join this important celebration because it is regarded as the most holy moment within the Orthodox, mainly, and Christian faith. People are prohibited from coming into the Old City on that day. There are restrictions, because the police say, "There can be no more than x number". Every year that number is negotiated with the police authorities. They want only 500 people to be in the space, whereas previously, if you go back 20 or 30 years, there were more than 10,000 people, not in the Holy Sepulchre itself, but in the plazas and in the streets. People could be a mile or two away from the Holy Sepulchre, but they still felt they were as close as they could be. But the police say that, because of safety regulations, they are prohibiting people to come any closer to the Sepulchre.

Q17 **Chair:** This Easter, on the Saturday before the resurrection, how many Christians were allowed into Jerusalem?

Hosam Elias Naoum: I do not have the exact statistics, but I think it was agreed that no more than 1,500 people could go in. His Beatitude can correct me on the numbers on how many eventually ended up going.

Q18 **Chair:** Was that the same on Easter day?

Theophilos III: No. Nothing has changed so far.

Chair: Easter day was the same?

Theophilos III: We have negotiations, we talk and talk, and our community meets with the police. The police of Jerusalem are in full charge of this ceremony, and we were given promises. We tried to co-operate with them, but at the end of the day, the police do what they want. It is a major problem because Christians want to at least be within the walls of the Old City. They allowed some of them to come, but people are not allowed to be closer to the Holy Sepulchre. The Patriarchate is adjacent to the Holy Sepulchre and there is enough space to accommodate people. We take responsibility for security and everything, but unfortunately there are all sorts of restrictions. People complain because sometimes pilgrims are allowed to come from around the world, but the locals are not allowed to join.

Q19 **Chair:** Yes, I see. That is the restriction on the Saturday; are there restrictions on the Friday or the Sunday at Easter?

Theophilos III: Not for the rest of the ceremony. But we have another problem on the day of the transfiguration or transformation of our Lord Jesus Christ on Mount Tabor. Mount Tabor, as you know, is in the heart of the north of Jerusalem in the Lower Galilee, and the ceremony is very



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important. I would say that, after the ceremony of the Holy Fire, the transfiguration holy day is very important.

In the last two years, we have all suddenly had the same problem. They do not allow pilgrims to come on to Mount Tabor, or the locals either. For the locals, especially the Christians who are Israelis, this special day is of paramount importance because they have made vows and want to go to baptise their children and so on, but they are not allowed to go. The ceremony takes place at midnight, and there are a lot of pilgrims. It is horrible because, again, the reason for not allowing them is security, but it an open space, not a closed one.

- Q20 **Chair:** It seems odd that there is a restriction of space for people on the Saturday, but not on the Friday or Sunday. If the restriction is about too many people, but it is okay on the Friday and Sunday—I do not want to give them ideas—why should it be restricted on the Saturday? As you say, Your Beatitude, if it is a matter of restriction because of space, why is there not enough space on Mount Tabor on this holy day, and why is there a restriction on that day?

Theophilos III: It is a real puzzle for us as well; we cannot explain it. There are all sorts of restrictions and arguments. It has never happened before because it is an open space. The midnight mass and the divine liturgy take place not inside the church but in the open space.

Chair: Yes, I see.

- Q21 **Edward Morello:** I want to give you an opportunity to clarify your view on the situation. Is the state deliberately acting to impede your freedom of worship? Do you believe that it is deliberate action by the current Government of Israel to impede your freedom of worship? Is it repression of freedom of expression, or is there any legitimacy to the claim that this is just health and safety? Perhaps you would like to go first, Your Grace.

Hosam Elias Naoum: I think that this question should really be directed to the Government themselves. My reading is that, even though there are, let me say, some justifications on the part of the police about safety on the two occasions that His Beatitude mentioned, we certainly see it as a restriction of and an impediment to our people reaching these holy sites and worshipping there.

Let me also be clear that there was an incident in the north of Israel in a place called Meron, which is on the Lebanese border and is a holy site for Jewish people. About 150 people died in a stampede and the collapse of a bridge in that place. Since that time, there have been more restrictions on open space worship in places where there are large gatherings. That is the background of why the police are doing this. We understand that, and we want the safety of our people. That is, of course, first and foremost because we do not want to endanger people's lives, but the number given to us—the starting number of 500 people going into the Holy Sepulchre—is so scarce and so little, and we do not believe that the true intentions are only about safety. That is the point.



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Instead of beginning to negotiate at 500 people, why don't we begin by focusing on at least 4,000 people? The people who live in the old city cannot leave their homes on that day, and it is creating a lot of anger for our people who are Jerusalemites at least, not to mention others who come from neighbouring villages and the cities. Why are these restrictions mainly for Christians? Other spaces could have hundreds of thousands of worshippers, but not the Holy Sepulchre. That is the point. We ask these questions. We never get the answers to them.

- Q22 Edward Morello:** I appreciate that the two events that you have identified are extremely high profile and therefore get the coverage. Can you give an example of more general use of the levers of state to impede the freedom of worship of Christians in Jerusalem?

Hosam Elias Naoum: Again, I do not think that Israel, as a Government, have any intention of deliberately impeding the freedom of worship. I do not believe that, but in these two incidents only we have seen an immediate restriction, which is not justified from our point of view. Since we are talking about the most holy dates in the liturgical year, that raises the question why. This gives some unclarity, and we are not really pleased that the most holy dates in our Church calendar have these restrictions.

- Q23 Fleur Anderson:** I just want to declare my entry in the Register of Members' Financial Interests, where it can be seen that I visited Israel and Palestine, including different parts of Jerusalem, in 2023 and 2024 with cross-party groups. I went to the Church of the Holy Sepulchre both times. Can I ask about another example of the closures that happened over Easter? Is it correct that Catholic leaders were prohibited from entering and using the Church of the Holy Sepulchre for a private mass on Palm Sunday?

Hosam Elias Naoum indicated assent.

Theophilos III indicated assent.

Fleur Anderson: You are both nodding. Your Grace, is that correct?

Hosam Elias Naoum: Yes, that is correct. Cardinal Pizzaballa and the clergy who accompanied him were prohibited because the whole city was under restrictions on any people gathering during that time, which was during the war with Iran. That was the reason. There was also a big piece of news that the Nuncio, who is the apostolic delegate to the Holy See, was among those who were forbidden to enter the Holy Fire and attend that day, for whatever reason. Eventually he got in, but he was stopped and was actually forbidden from going in as well.

- Q24 Chair:** I don't think I quite understand. Are you saying that, during the war with Iran, no one has been allowed into the Church of the Holy Sepulchre because public meetings have not been allowed?

Fleur Anderson: Was it closed for 40 days of restrictions?

Hosam Elias Naoum: Yes, that is correct. Not only that, but the al-Haram al-Sharif and the Western Wall were forbidden from any public worship during the 40 days.

Q25 **Chair:** Why?

Hosam Elias Naoum: I wish I knew. In the rest of Israel, depending on the regulations of the front determined by IDF, where restrictions depended on if you had a shelter or did not have a shelter, people were at least allowed together up to 100 or 200, but the Holy Sepulchre, after the prevention of the cardinal, allowed only five people to go in. I was the first one, with the permission of His Beatitude, to go with four people into the Holy Sepulchre and have my prayer on Monday of Holy Week.

Q26 **Chair:** I want to give some more examples, because there are more, by the sounds of this. There were problems with an Armenian church that was closed; do you know the background to that? There was a question in Parliament about Armenian Christians being told that they were evicted from a church by the Israeli police "within the premises of the Armenian Patriarchate." Do you know about this?

Hosam Elias Naoum: I am not aware which incident that is. Maybe His Beatitude knows?

Theophilos III: It was the Holy Fire ceremony. The Patriarchate proceeds from its monastery to the Holy Sepulchre which is a bit far away. They did not allow members of the Armenian Christian community to approach and enter the Holy Sepulchre.

Q27 **Chair:** Was it said that that was because of public safety?

Theophilos III: Well, it was for the reason that we have spoken about. The thing is that the organisation in full charge of all these restrictions is not the Government itself but the police. In the past year we addressed the issue to the President of Israel and the Prime Minister, and they helped us in this respect. However, the problem is that the police decide on those issues and that is our problem today.

Chair: Okay. Perhaps we should move on.

Q28 **Fleur Anderson:** As a Committee, we understand that there is the conflict in Gaza and the west bank, but there is also the contested area of the holy sites in Jerusalem. We are trying to understand both examples of what is happening now and also what you think should happen to the Status Quo.

Is there a wider issue of destabilisation being caused by building work? That is happening in the Christian quarter of Jerusalem, for example, with the E1 building site. Is the building there causing more instability within Jerusalem and therefore within the wider conflict in the region? Who is now proposing changes to the Status Quo and what are the religious arguments for changing the rules or keeping them as they are? What is your view on what should happen with the Status Quo?

Hosam Elias Naoum: You mentioned quite a broad range of issues and they are differently connected; however, each is really a world by itself.



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Let me begin with the Status Quo. In the last half an hour we have spoken about the Status Quo within the Holy Sepulchre and the Christian holy sites. However, we are now shifting into the broader status quo that governs the life and character of Jerusalem and the tapestry that His Beatitude referred to: the Jewish, Christian and Muslim holy sites and how they are governed.

One of the conflicts and controversies is over Haram al-Sharif and the Western Wall and how those are governed. I would like to mention the importance of the historic Status Quo and the custodianship of the Hashemite Kingdom and His Majesty King Abdullah currently being the custodian of Christian holy sites.

I would like to give His Beatitude a chance to talk more about this issue because it was arranged between one of his predecessors and Umar ibn al-Khattab in the early eighth century. It is an important thing for us because it is a model to guarantee the safety and character of Jerusalem when it comes to freedom of worship and refuting and combating extremism. What we have seen in terms of the violations of many extremist groups, especially Jewish settlers coming into the Haram al-Sharif to perform prayers and trying to violate the Status Quo, is that they create an immense reaction and are causing a lot of damage to the tapestry of Jerusalem itself.

I am trying to be brief in my answer, but this is a very important issue. As Christians we deeply value the custodianship of the Hashemite Kingdom because we see it as safeguarding interfaith relations along with ecumenical relations within Christianity itself.

Q29 Chair: The first time I went to Jerusalem, I remember being struck by how many different quarters there were, and how one part belonged to one group and a different part to another. But when I have been in more recent years, there were lots of Israeli flags in what I thought was the Armenian quarter and so on. When you are referring to settlers, is that what you mean? That there is an encroachment by Israelis into sectors that for 1,000-plus years have belonged to particular parts of the world?

Hosam Elias Naoum: You are absolutely right. On what has been happening in recent years, I believe that an immense amount of dollars has been invested into these endeavours. People and organisations like Elad and Ateret Cohanim say deliberately—if you go on their websites—that they want to purify Jerusalem from infidels like Christians and that this whole superstition of the four quarters of Jerusalem is not to be upheld because it is the eternal capital of Israel.

That is why we have seen a lot of violence against Christians—the spitting on clergy—and the violation and vandalism of cemeteries, and so on. More and more properties are bought either by persuasion or—I do not want to go into assumptions—even sometimes by force, to gain more property within the old city of Jerusalem. Our worry is that changing the character of Jerusalem and that tapestry would not only have real ramifications on



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Jerusalem and on Israel-Palestine relations, but would, I think, affect the whole world. That is our deepest concern.

- Q30 **Edward Morello:** I want to follow up on that, Your Grace. You talked about settler encroachment, but you also touched on increased levels of violence towards Christians in Jerusalem. This question is for you both. I am just wondering whether you could tell us a little about extremist groups and the extreme right wing in Israel. How does repression of Christian freedom of worship manifest itself? What is the increased level of violence towards Christian groups in the area, and how has that impeded your ability to worship and live in Jerusalem?

Theophilus III: It is true that there are incidents going on. The Government are not happy with this phenomenon, and they are trying their best to stop it. But there are religious groups that are encouraged on purpose by their own spiritual fathers—some rabbis—and attack Christians; they do all sorts of disrespectful things. Again, everything is connected to the issue of Jerusalem, because it is, as I have said before, equally holy and sacred to Judaism, Christianity and Islam. We wholeheartedly respect that, and we always declare about it; there are now common statements where, as communities, we say that Jerusalem has enough room to accommodate everybody. Now the slogan for the radicals is, as my colleague Bishop Hosam said, "Christians have no place here because they are profaning Jerusalem."

- Q31 **Edward Morello:** Archbishop, do you have anything to add about how you have seen violence manifest itself and what the impact has been on the community's ability to worship freely?

Hosam Elias Naoum: Yes, indeed. The end result of that definitely affects the freedom of worship. Let me give you a living example. If I walk within the streets of Jerusalem with my cross on my chest, there is a very high chance that I will be spat at. Not me, but many clergy sometimes try to avoid clashes because many of these settlers have guns on them.

Chair: Wow.

Hosam Elias Naoum: Those clergy try to be discreet about how they go on processions or go from one place to another within the old city. By itself, that is creating fear within our communities—within our clergy—because they could be in danger. At the end of the day, that is affecting our freedom of worship. That is from my point of view.

- Q32 **Chair:** I hear what you say, Your Beatitude—that the Government do not want this to happen. But presumably the police are supposed to do what the Government say. Why are the police not protecting you? Why are the police spending their time stopping people going into church to worship at holy times of the year? Why do they not put their effort into protecting you from these extremists?

Theophilus III: Everything is connected to the political developments here. That is all.

- Q33 **Chair:** You are a great diplomat, if you do not mind me saying.



Hosam Elias Naoum: One problem to do with politics is that we have people in the Government like Ben-Gvir, who justifies spitting on Christian clergy by saying it is an old tradition. That is what he says, and he said it publicly. People who are in Government offices, in a position like that, should be really careful, even if their own views on those matters are like that. They should not be given an opportunity to say that publicly or to endorse such shameful actions within the community.

One of the most problematic things is that spitting on clergy is not an offence within Israeli law, unfortunately. That is why we have been trying to plead with the Members of the Knesset in order to introduce more restrictions and find ways in which people who spit can be subject to some kind of punishment somehow.

Our greatest problem is with those in the Government watching yeshivot, which are Jewish schools. They are where our people are educated how to hate others. Hate speech and incitement is something that is running deep in many schools within some Jewish communities, especially around Mount Zion in Jerusalem. There are many Jewish agencies trying to combat that, but I think if you look at the curriculum and how some rabbis are teaching their students about hating Christians specifically, it is something of really deep concern within our communities. How can we refute that in order to stop these students—children—from being educated to hate people who are different from them? That is our deepest concern.

Q34 **Chair:** Could you give me an example of the sorts of things that the children are being told?

Hosam Elias Naoum: I have been trying to obtain a document that has been circulating in some settlements. The title of that was given to me in a meeting by the Reform rabbi, who has come to Israel to try to find ways in which we can bring down this hate speech, incitement, relations. That is because it is our duty together to bring communities together.

There are books circulated in settlements within these circles, including in Jerusalem on Mount Zion, in which children are taught how to hate people who are from different religions. I am not generalising them all, but certainly there are some. That has been witnessed from within the community itself. Honestly speaking, we see that on the streets. It is not something that we are saying may or may not be happening. We see this wave of young people stopping on street corners and telling pilgrims from abroad, "Go home. This is not a Christian place." That is worrying for us. Christians, especially in the Holy Land, have always respected the tapestry of Jerusalem and the freedom of worship for all faiths. We have had excellent relations over the centuries in that regard, and to see that disappearing gives us a huge sense of loss and bereavement.

Theophilos III: There was an employee in the Jerusalem municipality who belongs to those extremist groups, and he was publicly offering free-of-charge tickets to those who want to go away from Jerusalem, especially the Christians—not Jewish people.

Fleur Anderson: To where?

Q35 **Chair:** Where were they supposed to go?

Theophilos III: They were given tickets free of charge to go away and leave Jerusalem. That means: "You are not wanted here."

Q36 **Chair:** We are running out of time, but before I allow you to go, can I be cheeky and put two questions to you? First, is there a question that we should have asked you but have not? If so, please give an answer to it. Secondly, is there anything more that the British Foreign Office can do to give Christians in Jerusalem more support?

Theophilos III: What we always want is protection of the Status Quo. Jerusalem is a very special place that keeps together all people—all our religious communities. That is the power and the special character of Jerusalem, which receives pilgrims from around the world. There is no discrimination; on the contrary, this is a very special place. This is what we want to keep and protect. We are not here for ourselves; we represent the whole world. That is why we have rights and privileges, and, at the same time, obligations. Our obligation is to keep Jerusalem and the holy places accessible to anyone, without any problems and without any discrimination whatsoever.

Chair: That is very powerful. Thank you very much.

Hosam Elias Naoum: I want to touch on the second question. Our representatives—if I say "our", it is because I have many hats—Ambassador Tzipi Hotovely, Husam Zomlot and His Excellency Manar Dabbas represent our communities. They represent our patriarchies and dioceses in the Holy Land, and our subjects—our faithful are in these different countries.

I know that it is conflictual—a hot potato—to touch on issues of Israel-Palestine, but I really want to commend the work of the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan, not because I am biased but because I really do believe that His Excellency Manar Dabbas plays a very important role in representing His Majesty the King with a policy that tries to bring Palestinians and Israelis together and bridge the gap, and by presenting a narrative that sustains the character of Jerusalem and the peace treaties, trying to save what we can of the Oslo agreement.

We are not politicians, but as people of faith we are trying to support any good will effort by diplomats and politicians that will bring about peace in our region. If there is peace in Jerusalem, the whole world will enjoy peace in a very different way.

Chair: Thank you both for your time today. Your evidence has been so powerful and very interesting for us and all those who have been watching. We are really grateful for your time. We had hoped to hear from Gilad Kariv after you had given evidence, but unfortunately the business of the Knesset means that it is opening this afternoon and he needs to attend—as all Members of Parliament do. As Members of Parliament



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ourselves, we understand that there are times when you have to be somewhere else. Instead, we are going to end our session here. Once more, thank you both so much, gentlemen.