



Christianity in The Holy Land APPG Meeting

12th September 2022

14:00-15:00

Minutes

Contributions may be paraphrased unless placed in quotation marks.

Attendees:

Members

- Caroline Ansell MP
- Bishop Christopher Chessun
- Patrick Grady MP
- Danny Kruger MP
- Andrew Selous MP

Support

- David Small (assistant to Caroline Ansell MP)
- Hector Forrester (on behalf of Alexander Stafford MP)
- Austin Tiffany (Secretariat)
- Esmé Partridge (Secretariat)

Speakers

- Bishop William Hanna Shomali (Latin Patriarchate of Jerusalem)
- Danny Seidemann (Terrestrial Jerusalem)

Opening Remarks from Caroline Ansell

- Welcoming new members of the APPG, Danny Kruger MP and Alexander Stafford MP
- Search for a replacement Chair is ongoing
- New APPG rules include a limit on officers; we are currently two officers over the maximum number of four

Contribution from Bishop William Shomali (Latin Patriarchate of Jerusalem) on Travel Permits affecting Christian Pilgrimages

- There are six kinds of permits granted to Palestinians to be in Israel, including for work (currently the Church is allowed 250 employees), holidays (which include pilgrimages), medical reasons, airport transfers and family reunion (required, for example, if a Palestinian Arab marries an Israeli Arab)
- Sometimes applications for holiday permits are declined for no apparent reason, which negatively impacts Christian pilgrims, especially when they are trying to organise pilgrimages in families or groups. Notably, many applications to visit Gaza were declined this Easter; there was a significant reduction in permits granted this year to in previous years
- Likewise family reunion permit applications are sometimes declined for no apparent reason, which can negatively impact Christians

Q&A with Bishop Shomali

CC: Visa applications not being granted to pilgrims has a negative impact on Christians and leading to separation at festivals. What is the motivation behind this system that is difficult for Christians?

BS: Considering that Hamas governs Gaza, it is possible that the government is doing it to keep out Hamas, and that the effect on Christians is inadvertent. But it is important that Christians can connect with other Christians as the community in Gaza is very small.

DK: What relations does the church have with the Israeli government?

BS: The bishop met with the Israeli coordinator for the West Bank and Gaza and he was understanding of Christian concerns, and seems committed to resolving the issue, although we cannot yet see the results of the promises.

CA: Did the official formally commit to taking steps to resolve the issues with applications? Will we see a change at Christmas?

BS: He gave us a positive response and a contact detail of a person in the office who deals with this issue, but we will have to see whether that makes a difference at Christmas.

AS: Has there been any pressures from other foreign governments to resolve this?

BS: [Expressed that he is personally unsure of the scale of international concern]

CC: There are frequent interventions and petitions by various church leaders, but in the past this has not impacted practice on the ground. Christmas will be the first test.

CA: Surely similar people are applying for the pilgrimage each year. Do they have to repeat the process over and over again each time?

BS: Some people, including my sister (a teacher in a Catholic university) are blacklisted, in her case for ten years. This means that people can submit the same application every single year and be rejected for unclear reasons, possibly due to allegations of anti-Israel sentiment.

CA: Is there data to support this? Is it possible that they are being rejected simply because of capacity issues?

BS: Yes, but they have reduced the capacity in recent years. They now only allow a maximum of 1800 visitors for religious festivals at the Holy Sepulchre, which does not seem reasonable because those coming are spread out over 50 pilgrimage sites. So it seems unlikely that this is really about capacity.

Contribution from Danny Seidemann (Terrestrial Jerusalem) on the Israeli National Park Expansion

- Settler activity surrounding the old city is a major area of concern that Terrestrial Jerusalem are working to address
- New routes would connect different areas of the city, going through church property in the process
- The proposed park expansions are “an attempt to encircle the old city with settlements and settler activity in a way that will radically change the environment”
- The plans submitted in February proposed to encircle the Mount of Olives, and this was intentional; the parks authority in Jerusalem is motivated by settler ideology and organisation Elad
- The plan has been in the works for years and is intended to assert the supremacy of a Jewish fundamentalist biblical narrative
- At least 1 billion Israeli Shekels has already been funnelled into this

- There is a children's home run by Polish sisters on the Mount of Olives; they do not want to give their land over to the Israeli Parks Authority and so they now risk having it confiscated
- If plans go ahead, they will put Christian sites "under the thumb of settler organisations"
- President Biden is aware of this, and Archbishop Pizzaballa recently informed the European Union of it
- The plan has now been deferred five times thanks to these international interventions
- No one in Government is speaking to the Churches about this. Their actions do not seem to be motivated so much by a hostility towards Christianity, more *dismissiveness*
- That said, there have been increasing rates of hate crime in the region, in particular directed toward church property and clergy
- These attacks are being carried out by extremist fringe groups, but these fringe groups have an increasing presence throughout the region and could grow if these plans go ahead
- Extremists have been occupying and acquiring Christian property in the Christian and Armenian Quarters of the Old City and there is a risk that this will increase - there seems to be a correlation between this and where hate crimes are taking place
- We must secure the religious, cultural and historical integrity of Jerusalem in the face of these threats

Q&A with Danny Seidemann

PG: What are these settler routes, how are they managed, and what is the motivation behind them? Surely it is not in the interests of the Israeli government to worsen the experience of Christian pilgrimage sites, at least from a tourism perspective?

DS: The new routes are trails with signposts that would link different settlements (and overshadow the Christian sites). For example, a proposed 'Middle Promenade' has already been given statutory permission and plans for others are also in the works. This is being driven by some 3,000 settlers who are using their positions as park authorities to reflect their biblical fundamentalist landscape. The Prime Minister is not speaking out, but the tour guides on the ground are.