



## **Christianity in The Holy Land APPG: AGM**

**30<sup>th</sup> April 2024**

**10:00 – 11:00**

Minutes

**Chair:** Steve Double MP

**Speakers:** Dr Varsen Aghabekian, Hagop Djernazian

### **I. Opening Comments from Dr Varsen Aghabekian on Issues Facing Christians and the Importance of Diplomatic Efforts:**

- Dr Aghabekian raised recent increases in incitements of violence against Christians, noting the desecration of cemeteries and ongoing trend of people spitting on clergy as particularly widespread issues.
- She added Israeli ministers do not take these incidents seriously, and there has been a track record of ministers downplaying incidents.
- Dr Aghabekian further raised the importance of continuing to follow the issues in Jaffa Gate, highlighting its strategic role in the region.
- She further raised the importance of members understanding Christians' contributions in the region, highlighting:
  - the fact there are 297 Christian-related organisations, or organisations funded by churches that provide services in all of Palestine; and
  - that these organisations are the 3<sup>rd</sup> largest employers in Palestine.
- According to Dr Aghabekian, if we lose these organisations (due to loss of staff or funding), it'll be a loss both to the Christian values these organisations bring and all the valuable services they provide in the region
- She further called on members to advocate on Christians' need in the Holy Land, by:
  - sending letters to the embassy about religious freedom;
  - speaking on the role of Christian Churches abroad
  - highlighting the existence of Christians in Palestine
  - asking for accountability on violations of freedom of religion for all faiths
  - listening to personal stories, which bring out a personal dimension

## **II. Questions from Members to Dr Aghabekian**

- Baroness Newnham of Smith asked to what extent the Christian population also under threat from Islamists and Hamas, to which Dr Aghabekian answered that the violence from Israeli extremists is far more prevalent. She further added that issues from Islamists are dealt with far more quickly and efficiently than those caused by Israeli extremists.
- David Linden MP asked for an expansion on what is happening on Jaffa Gate. Dr Aghabekian explained the area's strategic importance to extremists' efforts to takeover the Christian land in the Old City. She explained the dispute is part of a long list of controversial land deals where extremists operate under the guise of being "investors".

## **III. Comments from Hagop Djernazian on the Current Land Dispute Facing the Armenian Quarter**

- Hagop outlined the current Cow's Garden Land Deal dispute, explaining the illegalities surrounding the 90-year lease.
- He explained that despite the Patriarchate sending a cancellation letter to avoid the deal, bulldozers were sent to the area.
- According to Hagop, the community has mobilised against the takeover, resulting in a 24h/7 to protect the land as much as possible and avoid the takeover.
- He explained the community is exploring different legal avenues and lawsuits to try and protect the land.
- He further explained the reason the land deal is so important to the Armenian community is because of the land's role in connecting the Armenian and Christian Quarters, and that losing the land will therefore mean the Church is no longer able to function.

## **IV. Questions from Members to Mr Djernazian**

- Annette Moskofian (from the Armenia APPG Secretariat and Chairperson of Armenian Committee UK) asked whether he sees a connection between the actions in the Armenian Quarter and the Azerbaijani war against Armenia, given their allyship.
- Mr Djernazian replied that although he certainly sees the connection with what's happening in Azerbaijan, which has strengthened the relations between Israel and Azerbaijan, the targeting of the Armenian and Christian Quarters have been ongoing since 1967.
- Steve Double MP asked whether he believes the targeting of Jaffa Gate is aimed at targeting the land or the Armenian people themselves.
- Mr Djernazian explained he sees the actions as part of a wider policy to unsettle and ultimately change the Status Quo in Jerusalem:
  - He particularly highlighted the Church's position in protecting the Status Quo and having Jews, Muslims and Christians live together peacefully.
- Baroness Newnham of Smith enquired on how to engage more with the Armenian community in Jerusalem, and whether either speaker believes the higher taxes being imposed on the Orthodox Church is related to the Israeli policy of changing the Status Quo.

- In response, Dr Aghabekian explained that there was a clear link, as implementing the suggested taxes would result in the disappearance of the Christian community entirely. She further highlighted their illegality due to violating the Status Quo.
  - Dr Djernazian added that the taxation issue is raised every 5 or so years, the last time being in 2018 as part of an intimidation tactic against the Christian community.
- Dr Djernazian further added one of the big issues facing Christians in the region is restrictions on their right to freedom of religion, especially around holy days, such as Easter and the Holy Fire ceremony.
  - He explained that these festivals are increasingly used to limit the Christian presence in Jerusalem, for example by imposing restrictions on the numbers able to enter the Holy Sepulchre Church.
  - He further highlighted that in the past, there were no restrictions.