News



A man carries wooden crosses near the entrance to the Church of the Holy Sepulcher in Jerusalem's Old City Feb. 28. (CNS/Ammar Awad, Reuters)

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Jerusalem — March 12, 2018
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An ethereal city graced with sunlight so bright it turns the white stone skyline gold at sunset, Jerusalem is also an earthbound city whose teachers must be paid and whose garbage must be collected.

Finding a balance between the Holy City's earthly needs, amid ongoing financial woes, and the needs of the numerous institutions that form its rich religious heritage is no easy task.

That balance was upset last month, leaders of the Holy Land's Christian churches say, when they received property tax bills totaling millions of dollars, applicable to all church properties that are not actual houses of worship.

The levying of those bills was spearheaded by Mayor Nir Barkat, who wants to shore up the city's small tax base.

"It is absurd for Jerusalem residents to fund municipal services for the churches … on their own, and for the municipality to be prevented from collecting enormous sums that could significantly improve the city's development and services," Barkat said.

But the move was unprecedented: For five centuries, successive rulers of the Holy Land — including Israel — have exempted all church holdings from property taxes.

When Israel was established in 1948, the government worried that allowing all religion-linked properties to be tax-free would be financially untenable, but continued the church exemption as a courtesy.

Christian officials, angered by the recent tax bills and the belief that Israel is trying to change the religious status quo in the contested city, decided to shutter the Church of the Holy Sepulchre for three days in protest.

"We, the heads of churches in charge of the Holy Sepulchre and the status quo governing the various Christian holy sites in Jerusalem — the Greek Orthodox

Patriarchate, the Custody of the Holy Land and the Armenian Patriarchate — are following with great concern the systematic campaign against the churches and the Christian community in the Holy Land," the church leaders said in a Feb. 25 joint statement announcing the closure.

The government reportedly fears setting a precedent that, once rooted in law, will enable Jews and Muslims, who have many more religious institutions, to demand the same fiscal status.

Two days later, Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu temporarily defused the controversy by ordering Barkat to suspend the tax bills and appointing a committee of church leaders and Israeli officials to negotiate.

Undeterred, the mayor said the municipality "is determined to settle past debts" totaling $188 million "and future municipal tax payments, according to the law, on behalf of the residents of Jerusalem."

Almost half of the city's residents, including predominantly ultra-Orthodox Jews and Muslim and Christian Arabs, are exempt from property taxes because they live below the poverty line, according to the Israeli Central Bureau of Statistics and National Insurance Institute.

Although the national government helps support Jerusalem's infrastructure, the mayor says that what the city gets is insufficient, so taxing church properties is necessary to fill the gap. The city also sent bills last month to another tax-exempt landowner, the United Nations.

The municipality ultimately hopes to collect taxes from 887 properties belonging to various churches and the U.N.

But because the city's Christian denominations — most notably the Greek Orthodox Patriarchate — own vast swaths of land in Jerusalem and elsewhere, tax policy has both religious and practical implications, said David Kroyanker, an expert on Jerusalem's multicultural architecture.

"Mainly since the 19th century, different Christian churches have acquired a huge number of properties," Kroyanker said. "The Jerusalem municipality is asking to tax only buildings that aren't churches, and they own much more than the churches."

Kroyanker questioned why the churches should be exempt from paying taxes on commercial property when comparable Jewish- and Muslim-owned property is not.

"Why shouldn't a building like the Notre Dame Center," a Catholic-owned complex that contains a church, a pilgrims' hotel, a restaurant and a gift shop, "pay tax at least for the areas that are purely commercial?"

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But precedent also has an important place in the discussion, the architect noted.

Since Israel's founding in 1948 the Israeli government hasn't charged tax, "so why start claiming it now? Once you take a stand it's difficult to change it."

In fact, representatives from the Israeli government and the Holy See have been negotiating taxation and other issues for two decades, but have failed to reach an agreement.

Rabbi David Rosen, the director of the American Jewish Committee's Department of Interreligious Affairs, called the exemptions Israel has given the churches "an act of magnanimity" by a government "that recognizes the special place of the churches in Jerusalem and the Holy Land.

"Israel has been under no legal obligation to do so," he said.

Although church leaders have officially taken an uncompromising stance, accusing the Israeli government of trying to spur the emigration of Holy Land Christians, who constitute about 2 percent of the Israeli population, Farid Jubran, general counsel for the Custody of the Holy Land, the body that oversees the property of the Catholic Church, indicated some flexibility.

"We never pretended to ask for an exemption in hotels and halls," Jubran said, adding that "it is very rare that a church has a hotel. I can think of only five or six (cases). We never said we won't pay taxes."

Jubran said the Notre Dame Center, which is located just across the street from the Christian Quarter of the Old City of Jerusalem, "has a chapel, a church and a monastery. If you go there you will see it is full of pilgrims."

Jubran said that if the municipality wants to tax certain church properties, "it should be done through negotiations and not in a unilateral way. And certainly not retroactively."