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A bearded brown man holds a child in one arm and adjusts a candle with the other hand, whil

William Mabouk holds his son Yonathan, 3, while lighting a candle at the Stella Maris Carmelite monastery in Haifa, Israel, during a July 30, 2023, protest by Holy Land Christians against what they say are insufficient actions by the Israeli police in blocking some members of the Breslov ultra-orthodox sect who began arriving at the monastery in early May, claiming it is a Jewish holy site. (OSV News photo/Debbie Hill)



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Vatican City — September 19, 2023
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The Vatican urged the international community to press for a "special statute" to guarantee religious freedom in the city of Jerusalem in any agreements regarding a peace deal between Israel and Palestine.

Addressing a ministerial-level meeting on the sidelines of the U.N. General Assembly in New York Sept. 18, Archbishop Paul R. Gallagher, Vatican foreign minister, called for an internationally guaranteed statute on Jerusalem to ensure "the equal rights and duties of the faithful of the three monotheistic religions (Christians, Jews and Muslims), the absolute guarantee of freedom of religion and of access to and worship in the holy places, and respect for the status quo regime, where it applies."

"To this end, the specific multireligious character, spiritual dimension and the unique identity and cultural heritage of Jerusalem must be preserved and promoted," he told a group of foreign ministers from some 50 nations.

The meeting launched working groups from the European Union, the League of Arab States and Jordan to create incentives for Israel and Palestine to strike a peace deal. A joint statement released by participants after the meeting urged contributors to the "peace supporting package" to work toward "ensuring the historic status quo of Jerusalem's holy sites" which includes the role of Jordan in managing Islamic and Christian holy sites in the city.

Gallagher said that establishing guidelines for the administration of Jerusalem is a "central point of contention that needs to be addressed in order to achieve a stable and lasting peace" between Israel and Palestine, and he lamented the "acts of intolerance" in the city "recently perpetrated by some Jewish extremists against Christians."

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"Any such actions must be clearly condemned by all governments, first and foremost the Israeli government, as well as prosecuted by the law and prevented in the future through education in fraternity," he said.

In July, Israeli President Isaac Herzog denounced increasing violence against Christians throughout the country and particularly in Jerusalem, calling attacks against Christians "a true disgrace."

"The Holy See," Gallagher said during his address, "sees Jerusalem not as a place of confrontation and division, but as one of encounter where Christians, Jews and Muslims can live together with respect and mutual goodwill."

The archbishop recalled that Pope Francis "has repeatedly called on Israelis and Palestinians to engage in direct dialogue," and that the Israeli and Palestinian presidents met at the Vatican in 2014 to pray for peace together and planted a symbolic olive tree in the Vatican gardens.

"It seems to me that there have not been any more similar high-level meetings," he noted. "Nevertheless, we continue to water that olive tree, waiting for the presidents of both states, accompanied by their governments, to come again to reap the fruits of peace."