

Orthodox depose Holy Land patriarch: Conflict over transfer of church property

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Anglican, Lutheran and Roman Catholic leaders have offered to mediate in a scandal in Jerusalem that has seen the Greek Orthodox patriarch for the Holy Land Irineos I deposed by his own bishops over allegations that he authorized the transfer of church property to Jewish investors.

The allegations that Irineos I approved a long-term lease of church property in Jerusalem's Old City to Jewish investors have caused a split in the church and also evoked concern by leaders of churches in the city.

The reports also infuriated the church's mostly Arab parishioners, who have long complained about the control over church property by Greek clerics and the church's failure to appoint a Palestinian patriarch instead of a Greek.

"We have completed the process of removing Irineos as patriarch," patriarchate secretary Aristarchos told journalists May 7. "For us, he is now considered the ex-patriarch," Aristarchos said, after 12 of the church's 18 bishops voted to remove Irineos from office.

Prior to those proceedings, Patriarch Michel Sabbah, the Latin patriarch of Jerusalem representing the Roman Catholic Church; Bishop Riah Abu Al-Assal of the Episcopal Diocese of Jerusalem; and Bishop Munib Younan of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Jordan and the Holy Land said they were willing to mediate, in a statement issued to Palestinian Arabic-language newspapers.

"We express our disagreement with the selling of any Christian property of any denomination to any side because the purpose of these properties is to serve the church and its children," they said.

“For this reason, we call upon all the concerned parties and the responsible civil and ecclesiastical authorities to unite and work together to explain what has actually happened and to ensure the return of all property and rights to the Greek Orthodox Church,” the three bishops said. “We express our readiness to contribute and work to find a solution to this crisis.”

Still, it was not clear whether Irineos’s dismissal was final. The governments of Israel, the Palestinian Authority and particularly Jordan may be required to recognize the dismissal for it to take effect under agreements that govern church-state relations.

Irineos turned up at the patriarchate in early May under police guard—which was seen as a sign that he did not accept his dismissal. Aristarchos said that Irineos was deposed not because he authorized long-term leases of church property to Jewish investors but rather because he failed to consult the synod about such sales.

An Israeli newspaper first published the allegations that the patriarchate transferred property at the entrance to Jerusalem’s Old City to Jewish investors by selling them a 99-year lease in return for millions of dollars for the cash-strapped patriarchate.

Irineos has denied any wrongdoing and blamed a former financial adviser for leasing the property without his permission. The adviser is on the run from police. –

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