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Middle East Christians incensed by Trump decision



Christians in Amman, Jordan, protest President Trump's recognition of Jerusalem as Israel's capital on Dec. 13, 2017. (Muhammad Hamed/Reuters)

by [Loveday Morris](#)

JERUSALEM — Some of the festive cheer was missing last weekend at a public Christmas tree lighting near the site where Christians believe an angel proclaimed Christ's birth to local shepherds.

“Our oppressors have decided to deprive us from the joy of Christmas,” Patriarch Michel Sabbah, the former archbishop and Latin patriarch of Jerusalem, told the crowd in the town of Beit Sahour in the Israeli-occupied West Bank. “Mr. Trump told us clearly Jerusalem is not yours.”

The Trump administration’s decision to recognize Jerusalem as Israel’s capital and move the U.S. Embassy there has provoked widespread opposition among Christians across the Middle East. When Vice President Pence arrives next week on a trip touted as a chance to check on the region’s persecuted Christians, he will be facing an awkward backlash.

The pope of the Egyptian Coptic Church, who leads the largest Christian denomination in the Middle East, has called off a scheduled meeting with Pence in Cairo. The Chaldean Church in Iraq warned this week that the White House move on Jerusalem risks sparking regional violence and extremism and demanded that the Trump administration respect U.N. resolutions on the city.



Sheikh Ahmed el-Tayeb, grand imam of al-Azhar, left, said he rejected a meeting scheduled for later this month with Vice President Pence. Pope Tawadros II of Alexandria, right, head of the Egyptian Coptic Orthodox Church, announced that he would also reschedule his meeting with Pence. (Khaled Elfiqi/European Pressphoto Agency-EFE)

In the West Bank city of Bethlehem, which is about 12 percent Christian and is a scheduled stop on Pence’s tour, religious leaders turned off the city’s Christmas tree lights last week to protest the White House announcement.

In the city, the writing is on the wall: “Mr PENCE you are not welcome,” someone has scrawled in red spray paint on the 26-foot-high concrete Israeli security barrier that separates Bethlehem from Jerusalem.

On Sunday, demonstrators staged a sit-in outside the Church of the Nativity, built on the site thought to be the birthplace of Jesus. “We will not receive Mr. Pence here,” said Saleh Bandak, a Bethlehem-born Christian politician who attended Sunday’s protest.

While the news has been badly received among Christian communities in the Middle East, the move was in part a political gesture aimed at Christians: white evangelical voters, who backed Trump overwhelmingly in last year’s presidential election. American evangelical Christians — who believe that the right of the Jews to Jerusalem is enshrined in the Bible and that their presence there will usher in Judgment Day — were a powerful lobbying force behind the decision.

Palestinian Christians complain that Christian evangelicals’ support of Israel doesn’t take into consideration the rights and needs of Christians in the homeland of their religion.

“This is where it all started,” said the Rev. Mitri Raheb, a Lutheran pastor in Bethlehem. “The Bible originated in Palestine, not in the Bible Belt, but people in the Bible Belt read the Bible in a way that really makes our lives difficult.”

Trump received about 80 percent of the white evangelical vote, according to exit polls, more than any other recent Republican presidential candidate.

His campaign had recognized the importance of the evangelical vote by picking Pence, then Indiana governor, as Trump’s running mate. A self-described Catholic evangelical, Pence helped energize and turn out that constituency.

The White House recognition of Jerusalem went ahead despite warnings from Pope Francis; the archbishop of Canterbury, who heads the Church of England and is a leader for Anglicans worldwide; and the heads and patriarchs of various churches in Jerusalem. Egypt’s Coptic Church said the decision had disregarded the feelings of millions of Arabs.

Palestinian Authority President Mahmoud Abbas has canceled his meeting with the vice president following the decision, making it unclear whether Pence will still visit Bethlehem on a tour that was meant to include Jerusalem, the West Bank and Egypt. A spokeswoman for Pence said she could not share details of changes to his schedule at this time.

The White House has repeatedly said it is seeking to better protect Christians in the Middle East. Christians are estimated to make up less than 2 percent of the Palestinian population in the West Bank, Jerusalem and Gaza, a shrinking but influential minority. Most are Greek Orthodox, but they also include Catholics, Lutherans and Anglicans. The evangelical community is a tiny minority.

“When they talk about Christian minorities in danger, they talk about Iraq and other regions where ISIS is the threat,” Raheb said, referring to Islamic State militants. “They never, ever address the issue of Palestinian Christians under Israeli occupation.”

Pence has been a longtime proponent of the embassy move and hinted at Trump’s decision in a speech the week before the announcement. In a video message to Republicans in Israel in October, Pence described Jerusalem as “the eternal, undivided capital of the Jewish people.”

Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu has said that only Israeli sovereignty over Jerusalem can ensure freedom of access to the city’s holy sites, sacred to Jews, Christian and Muslims. Jews were expelled from Jerusalem’s Old City in the 1948 Arab-Israeli war and synagogues were ransacked and destroyed. During that same war, many Palestinian Christians fled or were expelled from areas now under Israeli control; like other displaced Palestinians, they are denied the right to return.

In reaction to Trump’s announcement, Netanyahu said there would be “no change whatsoever” to the status quo of the holy sites.

“Israel will always ensure freedom of worship for Jews, Christians and Muslims alike,” he said. As evidence of the protection it affords Christians, Israel has pointed to the increasing size of its Christian minority and the shrinking size of that in the Palestinian territories. Palestinians say it is largely the trials of living under occupation that are driving their Christian population away.

Raheb notes that there is no freedom of access to Jerusalem for Christian and Muslim men under 55 and women under 50 living in the West Bank, who both need to obtain a permit to visit.

“Our mere existence as Christians here is inconvenient as it means this conflict can’t be framed as a religious war between Jews and Muslims,” said Raheb. “It’s not about religion. It’s a political conflict over land and resources.”

The Rev. Jamal Khader, the parish priest for a Catholic congregation of 500 families in the West Bank city of Ramallah, said he fears that the White House will inflame sectarianism between Christians and Muslims and give extremists an excuse to attack Christians. In making the White House announcement in front of a Christmas tree, Trump framed it as a declaration by the Christian West aimed at the Muslim world, Khader said.

“We are trying to convince people, especially Christians, to avoid violence,” he said. “But I’m worried. How can I convince young people to react in a nonviolent way?”

There have been regular clashes between Israeli security forces and Palestinian protesters in the wake of Trump’s declaration, with violence erupting in Bethlehem, Ramallah, Hebron and other West Bank towns, in addition to the Gaza Strip.

Trump said his announcement didn’t mean the United States was taking a position on whether - Israel ultimately had sovereignty over all of Jerusalem, but Palestinians were not reassured.

“Of course everyone is upset about it. This is a political issue,” said Theophilos III, the patriarch of the Greek Orthodox Church in Jerusalem, which he called “a city for the whole world, two people and three religions.”

But evangelical Trump supporters have gushed with praise for the decision. “We and the millions of Christians we represent will never forget your courageous act,” Christians United for Israel said in a full-page ad in The Washington Post on Sunday thanking Trump.

Anne Gearan in Washington, Ruth Eglash in Jerusalem, Mustafa Salim in Baghdad and Heba Farouk Mahfouz in Cairo contributed to this report.

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