

CHRIS VAN HOLLEN  
MARYLAND

SH-730 HART SENATE OFFICE  
BUILDING WASHINGTON DC 20510  
OFFICE (202) 224-4654  
FAX (202) 228-0629

## United States Senate

APPROPRIATIONS  
BANKING, HOUSING, AND  
URBAN AFFAIRS  
BUDGET  
FOREIGN RELATIONS

August 5, 2025

The Honorable Mike Huckabee  
U.S. Ambassador to Israel  
U.S. Embassy Jerusalem  
14 David Flusser  
Jerusalem 9378322, Israel

Dear Ambassador Huckabee:

I write in the wake of yet another disturbing wave of settler violence to express my appreciation for your recent efforts to defend and elevate the concerns of Christian communities in the Holy Land. In July 2024, I met with church leaders and representatives of Christian communities in Jerusalem, including the Greek Orthodox, Latin, and Armenian Patriarchates; the Custody of the Holy Land; and the Anglican and Lutheran Churches. They described growing challenges facing their churches and local Christian communities, many of which are reflected in the examples below. It is deeply disappointing that these issues remain unresolved.

Your public condemnation of the attacks in Taybeh earlier in July and your visit to the village were important demonstrations of moral leadership and solidarity - and a strong statement of our country's determination to protect the religious rights and liberties of all faith communities, including vulnerable minority groups. As you stated on July 19 in response to an arson attack that targeted the Christian church there, "I work for ALL American citizens who live in Israel-Jewish, Muslim or Christian. When they are terrorized or victims of crime I will demand those responsible be held accountable w/ real consequences. Was in Taybeh today to meet with people of that village to listen & learn."

As you know, the attacks on Taybeh have continued since your visit. The Times of Israel reported on July 28 that another violent attack struck the Christian town of Taybeh in the West Bank. Settlers stormed the town, driving livestock through its center, torching multiple vehicles, and scrawling hateful graffiti. Just days earlier, masked figures—some carrying weapons, others riding horseback—patrolled the streets, intimidating villagers and disrupting the community's everyday life. In recent days, violent settlers also raided the Palestinian towns of Silwad, Rammun, and Abu Falah, east of Ramallah, in the West Bank, burning cars and leading to the death of one person. The heads of Jerusalem's churches issued a joint statement on July 29 expressing deep concerns regarding "an alarming pattern of settler violence" and noting that "the lack of accountability not only threatens Christian communities but also weakens the moral and legal foundations that uphold peace and justice for all." Just as Secretary of State Rubio recently condemned attacks against religious minorities in Syria, I urge you to speak out about these attacks and press the Israeli government to hold the perpetrators to account.

### STATE OFFICES

ROCKVILLE OFFICE  
111 ROCKVILLE PIKE  
SUITE 960  
ROCKVILLE, MD 20850  
PHONE (301) 545-1500  
FAX (301) 545-1512

ANNAPOLIS OFFICE  
60 WEST STREET  
SUITE 107  
ANNAPOLIS, MD 21401  
PHONE (410) 263-1325

CAMBRIDGE OFFICE  
204 CEDAR STREET  
SUITE 200C  
CAMBRIDGE, MD 21613

BALTIMORE OFFICE  
1040 Park Avenue, Suite 120  
BALTIMORE, MD 21201  
PHONE (667) 212-4610  
FAX (667) 212-4618

HAGERSTOWN OFFICE  
32 WEST WASHINGTON STREET  
SUITE 203  
HAGERSTOWN, MD 21750  
PHONE (301) 797-2826

LARGO OFFICE  
1101 MERCANTILE LANE  
SUITE 210  
LARGO, MD 20774  
PHONE (301) 322-6560

I am also grateful for your intervention on behalf of American Christians facing unjust entry restrictions into Israel, and for your Administration's strong response and demand for accountability following the Israeli military strike on the Catholic church compound in Gaza. These actions are important to defending religious freedom and minority rights in the Holy Land and around the world. When we fail to take serious actions to defend religious and minority rights when they are threatened in countries with whom we have close bilateral relations, it undermines our credibility to raise these issues when they are under attack elsewhere.

I now ask for your continued engagement on a related urgent matter: the ongoing dispute concerning the interpretation and application of longstanding tax exemptions granted to religious institutions in Israel and escalating legal and financial pressures facing Christian churches across Israel. These actions pose an existential threat to Christian institutions that have been present in the Holy Land for centuries.

Local municipalities across Israel have intensified pressure in recent months for churches to pay what are astronomical tax levies. In Jerusalem, the Franciscans received final collection notices demanding over 17 million shekels without transparency, while Christian schools were denied education funds under the pretext of unpaid taxes. In Nazareth, institutions like the St. Francis Elderly Home face asset seizure threats despite legal exemptions. Tel Aviv and Haifa have frozen or threatened to freeze church bank accounts. These actions form a pattern of pressure that undermines the viability of Christian institutions across the country.

The Armenian Patriarchate of Jerusalem is among those targeted. In February, the Jerusalem municipality initiated foreclosure proceedings against the Patriarchate's properties, a move that threatens not only the institution itself but also the broader Christian presence in Jerusalem. The foreclosure actions deviate from longstanding legal and tax agreements that have historically recognized the unique status of Christian churches in the Holy Land. These actions are contrary to historical and contemporary agreements that provide the Christian churches with a special legal and tax status.

The so-called Fair Leasing Bill remains a looming threat. Although the next Knesset discussion has not yet been scheduled, the bill's provisions are deeply troubling. It would allow lessees to unilaterally renew leases for 49 or 99 years at existing terms with minimal rent adjustments, stripping churches of control over key properties. At a time when churches are facing severe financial strain due to municipal enforcement and dwindling pilgrim revenue, this measure would deny them the ability to responsibly manage or lease land, effectively forcing property sales and reducing the Christian presence in the Holy Land.

I am grateful for your engagement with Christian leaders in the region and hope that you and other senior U.S. officials will continue to press for a mutually acceptable settlement to these issues outside of the courts and punitive legislation. The precedent for this exists. In 2018, intervention by the U.S. government and other stakeholders successfully led Prime Minister Netanyahu to suspend both adverse legislation and the imposition of municipal taxes on churches. The establishment of a special committee under Minister of Regional Cooperation Tzachi Hanegbi was meant to develop a sustainable resolution, though it ultimately failed to progress. I believe this framework can be reactivated and adapted to address the current crisis with similar urgency and coordination.

The treatment of Christian institutions is an important indicator of the health of democracy and pluralism in Israel – as well as an important marker for religious freedom and safety for Christians and

other threatened minorities elsewhere in the region. Ensuring their protection is not only a matter of religious freedom, but also of preserving the broader principles of tolerance and the rule of law.

I look forward to your response.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read "Chris Van Hollen", is positioned above the printed name.

Chris Van Hollen  
United States Senator