



The Greek Orthodox Patriarchate of Jerusalem. The patriarchate's leadership played a central role in the January 2026 statement by Jerusalem church leaders condemning Christian Zionism as a "damaging ideology." The declaration sparked controversy over who speaks for Christians in the Holy Land and exposed a growing divide between the traditional church hierarchy and pro-Israel Christian voices. (Credit: Djampa/Wikimedia Commons, CC BY-SA 4.0)

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Timeless Theology or Dhimmi Diplomacy? Christian Zionism and Church Politics in the Holy Land

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A Controversial Statement: Patriarchs Against Christian Zionism

On January 17, 2026, the patriarchs and heads of churches in Jerusalem issued a statement warning that "recent activities undertaken by local individuals who advance damaging ideologies, such as Christian Zionism, mislead the public, sow confusion, and harm the unity of our flock."¹ The church leaders expressed concern that these activities had found favor among "certain political actors" in Israel and abroad who were seeking to "push a political agenda" that could "harm the Christian presence in the Holy Land and the wider Middle East." They further stated that the actions of the unnamed individuals constituted

"interference in the internal life of the churches," asserting that the patriarchs alone "represent the Churches and their flock in matters pertaining to Christian religious, communal, and pastoral life in the Holy Land."²

The statement appeared on the website of the Greek Orthodox Patriarchate but not on that of the Latin Patriarchate. It was briefly posted on the Franciscan Custody of the Holy Land website before being taken down. Signed collectively without individual names, it remains unclear whether the Armenian, Syriac, Anglican, and Lutheran churches fully endorsed it—a significant ambiguity that undermines its claim to speak for all Christians in the Holy Land.

Worldwide Controversy: The Church Against Christian Zionism?

The declaration sparked immediate controversy. Several Catholic pundits quickly claimed that “Catholics don’t believe in Zionism,” treating the patriarchs’ position as settled Catholic doctrine and dismissing Christian Zionism as a Protestant evangelical belief incompatible with Catholicism. Catholic podcaster Michael Knowles asserted on X that the patriarchs’ statement “has always been the Catholic view.”³ The next day, the group Catholics for Catholics endorsed the statement as “officially” denouncing Christian Zionism and reiterated the old supersessionist claim that the Church is the “new Israel”⁴—while overlooking Catholic teaching that the Church’s designation as “new people of God” does *not* mean that “the people of God of Israel has ceased to exist,” and that Israel remains “God’s chosen and beloved people of the covenant which has never been repealed or revoked.”⁵

The statement also drew serious pushback. U.S. Ambassador to Israel Mike Huckabee contested the claim that any “sect” should “claim exclusivity in speaking for Christians worldwide,” arguing that “a Zionist simply accepts that the Jewish people have a right to live in their ancient, indigenous, and Biblical homeland.”⁶ Catholic theologian Gavin D’Costa critiqued the statement for singling out Christian Zionism while “remaining silent about political Islamist ideologies that also seriously threaten Christian life and institutions across the region” and for leaving unanswered a fundamental question: “Is there any legitimate place for Israel at all, or is Zionism—Jewish or Christian—understood solely as a project of colonization and empire-building?”⁷ Petra Heldt, director of the Ecumenical Theological Research Fraternity in Israel, criticized the statement as “regrettable” for its lack of pastoral sensitivity and theological clarity.⁸

The statement set off a chain reaction in the United States, landing amid already-shifting Christian opinion on Israel. A January 2026 *Washington Post* report documented declining evangelical support for Israel, accelerated by Tucker Carlson’s public criticism and growing discomfort among younger evangelicals.⁹ A Pew Research Center poll from April 2026 confirmed that negative views of Israel

continue to rise among Americans, particularly the young.¹⁰ This trend has continued in recent months, with opposition to Israel becoming a bipartisan consensus.¹¹

Several prominent Catholic voices subsequently endorsed the patriarchs’ position. At a February 9, 2026, hearing before the Religious Liberty Commission, Carrie Prejean Boller declared: “I am a Catholic, and Catholics don’t embrace Zionism.”¹² Catholics for Catholics released a video on February 12 purporting to present “the Catholic View on Zionism and the 1948–State of Israel”—denying any theological validity to the Jewish state.¹³ Daily Wire podcaster Matt Fradd published on March 20 a “Small Catechism on Christian Zionism,” claiming to present the Church’s “final judgment” on the matter as “an ideology that misplaces the fulfillment of God’s promises”¹⁴—though as CAMERA’s David Orenstein demonstrated, Fradd’s presentation severely distorted both Christian Zionism and Catholic teaching on Israel.¹⁵ These responses shared a common assumption: that the patriarchs’ statement represented mainstream Catholic and Orthodox Christianity and that Christian Zionism was a Protestant evangelical deviation.

And yet the statement’s claims to theological authority and universal representativeness are themselves contested. The Latin Patriarchate’s absence and the Franciscan website’s removal of the text suggest that the consensus it claims is narrower than advertised. Moreover, the person largely absent from these public debates was the statement’s actual target: Lt. Col. (res.) Ihab Shlayan, founder of the Israeli Christian Voice. To understand the patriarchs’ response and Shlayan’s movement, some historical background is essential. A closer examination of the history and players behind the statement indicates that the patriarchs’ view has more to do with Middle Eastern church politics than with authoritative Christian doctrine on Israel and Zionism.

Historical Background: Palestinian Liberation Theology

Opposition to Zionism from Jerusalem’s churches has deep roots. Christians in the Holy Land have traditionally shared a common Palestinian or Arab identity with Muslims, and they played a role in the anti-Zionist

movement both before and after the establishment of Israel in 1948. Two Christian cousins in Jaffa founded the first newspaper in Ottoman-era Palestine—titled *Filistin* (Palestine)—which by 1911 held the largest circulation in the region and was a leading voice against Zionism.¹⁶

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Palestinian Christians were profoundly affected by the 1948 “Nakba.” Christian towns and villages were depopulated. Some Palestinian Christians played significant roles in the armed struggle: The Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine (PFLP) was founded in 1967 by George Habash, a Greek Orthodox Christian from Lydda (Lod), who had personally witnessed its forced depopulation. His co-founder Wadie Haddad was also an Orthodox Christian from Safed. But these figures were driven by secular Arab nationalism and Marxist-Leninist ideology, not by their Christian faith. Habash is quoted as saying: “When my land was occupied, I had no time to think about religion.”¹⁷

Nevertheless, Christian resistance to Israel has been primarily non-violent, and its driving ideological force has been Palestinian Liberation Theology (PLT). PLT emerged during the 1948 War and developed across subsequent decades, fueled by the ongoing conflict and the personal suffering of Palestinian Christians. Its foundational text is Naim Ateek’s 1989 *Justice and Only Justice: A Palestinian Theology of Liberation*. Ateek, an Anglican priest expelled from Galilee in 1948, founded the Sabeel Ecumenical Liberation Theology Center in Jerusalem in 1987. Other key PLT figures include Melkite Greek Catholic Archbishop Elias Chacour, a refugee from the destroyed village of Kafr Bir’am and author of the memoir *Blood Brothers*; Mitri Raheb, Evangelical Lutheran pastor from Bethlehem and founder of Dar al-Kalima University; Michel Sabbah, former Latin patriarch of

Jerusalem; and Munther Isaac, Lutheran pastor serving in Bethlehem and author of *Christ in the Rubble: Faith, the Bible, and the Genocide in Gaza*.¹⁸

PLT claims to reconcile Christian duties of love and forgiveness with resistance to Israeli occupation, providing a theological framework for Palestinian national aspirations. While claiming to be a prophetic and anti-imperial theology of nonviolence that offers solutions to the “present unjust situation,” it critiques Christian Zionism as “a prime example of the misuse of the Bible to promote violence, racism and injustice.”¹⁹

It is worth noting that liberation theology more broadly has been the subject of sustained criticism from the Catholic Church’s own Magisterium. Cardinal Ratzinger’s Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith (CDF) issued two authoritative Instructions on the subject—in 1984 and 1986. The 1984 Instruction cautioned against reducing the Gospel to a purely “earthly gospel” (VI.5) by using “concepts uncritically borrowed from Marxist ideology.” It warned against “a radical politicization of faith’s affirmations and of theological judgments” where “every affirmation of faith or of theology is subordinated to a political criterion”—a charge that applies directly to PLT’s subordination of theology to Palestinian national politics.²⁰ The 1986 document, more constructive in tone, likewise warned: “The salvific dimension of liberation cannot be reduced to the socio-ethical dimension, which is a consequence of it.” By this standard, any theology that roots liberation in ethnic identity and political resistance rather than the Gospel must be found wanting.²¹

PLT thought has directly shaped two landmark declarations from the Jerusalem church hierarchy. The 2006 “Jerusalem Declaration on Christian Zionism” categorically rejected Christian Zionist doctrines as “false teaching that corrupts the biblical message” and warned in no uncertain terms that “Christian Zionism and its alliances are justifying colonization, apartheid and empire-building.” The declaration condemned Christian Zionism for advancing “racial exclusivity and perpetual war” and for condemning the world to “the doom of Armageddon.”²² It prompted a joint response by three Christian Zionist organizations, which severely critiqued the declaration for using “inflammatory language” and

expressing views that are “far from the truth,” given that these Zionist organizations sought to be “a blessing” by aiding all population groups in the land.²³

The 2009 Kairos Palestine document, “A Moment of Truth,” co-authored by Ateek, Raheb, Sabbah, and others, went further still. The document accused Israel of multiple crimes while portraying the Palestinians as innocent victims, ignoring the history of Palestinian terrorism, including two violent intifadas. The document called for “resistance to the evil of occupation,” claiming that “if there were no occupation, there would be no resistance”²⁴—overlooking the fact that, as Malcolm Lowe pointed out, “organizations such as Hamas, which command mass support among the Palestinian population, are sworn to continue that resistance as long as the State of Israel exists.”²⁵ The document explicitly endorsed the Boycott, Divestment, and Sanctions (BDS) movement, calling on “individuals, companies and states to engage in divestment and in an economic and commercial boycott of everything produced by the occupation.”²⁶ Kairos Palestine has since become one of the most prominent Christian voices for BDS internationally.



Father Gabriel Naddaf with Deputy Minister Ofir Akunis and Christian IDF soldiers, December 14, 2014. An early leader of Israel's pro-integration Christian movement, Naddaf encouraged Christian Arabs to embrace an Aramean identity and serve in the Israel Defense Forces despite threats and intimidation against him and his family. (Credit: Wikimedia Commons)

A 2025 follow-up document, “Kairos Palestine II—A Moment of Truth: Faith in a Time of Genocide,” maintained the belligerent tone of its predecessor. It urged churches to “pressure their governments to isolate Israel, hold it accountable, impose sanctions, boycott it, and to ban the export of arms” while denouncing Christian Zionism as “a theological distortion and a moral corruption” that promotes a “tribal, racist god of war and ethnic

cleansing.”²⁷ The document has been critiqued for reading “less like an ecclesial or theological document and more like a manifesto shaped by contemporary revolutionary ideology,” and for failing in theological integrity, moral coherence, rhetorical responsibility, and empirical credibility by adopting language, assumptions, and moral logic mirroring “those of secular activist movements and Islamist propaganda far more closely than the Christian moral tradition it claims to represent.”²⁸

Perspective Shift: Zionist Israeli Christians and the Aramean Movement

Over recent decades, many Christians inside Israel have experienced a growing cognitive dissonance between the PLT narrative and lived reality. While PLT presented a united Palestinian Christian-Muslim front against Zionism, Israeli Christians increasingly found a greater existential threat in radical Islamist ideology than in the Jewish state. While rarely daring to say so publicly, Middle Eastern Christians had for decades repeated the proverb “After Saturday comes Sunday”—meaning that once Muslims finish with the Jews, they will turn on the Christians.²⁹ The Arab Spring of 2011 changed that calculus decisively.

The upheaval across the Arab world unleashed waves of violence against Christian minorities: Coptic churches in Egypt were attacked, Syrian Christian communities were targeted by Islamist rebels who declared Sharia law in captured villages, and the Islamic State subsequently erased ancient Christian communities across Iraq and Syria. For Israeli Christians, the contrast with Israel's comparatively free and tolerant society was impossible to ignore. The Arab Spring served as both a warning and a galvanizing moment: It made visible what had long been feared.

The pro-Israel Christian-Israeli movement represents a distinct and controversial strand of thought among Israel's indigenous Christian minority—one that rejects Palestinian Arab identity, embraces Zionism and Israeli state institutions, advocates for IDF service, and seeks recognition as a separate indigenous people (Arameans) rather than as Arab Christians. This often puts them at

odds with Palestinian Christians and the established Jerusalem church hierarchy—as seen in the January 2026 statement of the patriarchs and heads of churches.³⁰

The movement's institutional founding can be traced to October 2012 when a group of Christian activists—mostly mid-ranking IDF officers of Maronite background—founded the Israeli Christians Recruitment Forum, defining themselves as “Christian Israelis who speak Arabic.” At the forum's first public conference in October 2012, three priests expressed support. The following day, a campaign of threats and intimidation began. Two priests withdrew; one, Father Gabriel Naddaf, stood firm.³¹

Naddaf (b. 1973), a Greek Orthodox priest from Nazareth, became the movement's most visible early figurehead. He called on Christian Arabs to reassess their Arab identity, arguing that they were not ethnically Arab but indigenous Arameans—“descendants of people who lived here in Israel since biblical times”—inextricably linked to the Jewish people.³² Naddaf paid a heavy personal price: He was called a traitor and received death threats; he was banned from entering the Church of the Annunciation; his eldest son was beaten with an iron rod; and the Palestinian Authority pressured the Greek Orthodox patriarch to dismiss him.³³ In September 2014, Naddaf addressed the U.N. Human Rights Council, declaring: “Israel is the only place where Christians in the Middle East are safe.”³⁴

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A landmark legal breakthrough came the same month, when Interior Minister Gideon Sa'ar officially recognized Aramean as a distinct ethnicity, allowing Christians of Maronite, Greek Orthodox, Greek Catholic, and Syriac backgrounds to register as Aramean rather than as Arab. In October 2014, Shadi Khalloul's two-year-old son

became the first person in modern history to be so registered.³⁵ Before 2012, roughly 35 Christians per year volunteered for the IDF. By 2013, Christian IDF enlistment had already tripled.³⁶ At the time of writing, 394 Christian soldiers serve in the IDF.³⁷

Shadi Khalloul, president of the Israeli Christian Aramaic Association (ICAA), is now the movement's most internationally prominent voice. A former IDF paratrooper, five-time Knesset candidate, and founder of a joint Christian-Jewish pre-military academy, Khalloul quit high-tech marketing to devote himself to reviving Aramaic language and culture. He views Jews and Arameans as “the true indigenous” peoples of the land of Israel, “joined by history, ancestry, and culture,” whose partnership forms the basis for an “unbreakable bond.” He has stated, “Only under a Jewish sovereign state can we even hope to live as free men and women.”³⁸

Behind the Controversy: Lt. Col. (res.) Ihab Shlayan and the Israeli Christian Voice

The proximate cause of the patriarchs' January 2026 statement was the activism of Lt. Col. (res.) Ihab Shlayan, the highest-ranking Christian officer in the IDF's history and founder of the Israeli Christian Voice (ICV).³⁹ An Aramean of Greek Orthodox and Armenian background, Shlayan served in IDF command roles including battalion command on the Golan Heights and on Mount Hermon. He designed the Israeli Christian flag and, in 2012, co-founded the Christian Recruitment Forum—the first body to unite Israeli Christians across all denominations around civic integration and military service.⁴⁰

Through the ICV, Shlayan promotes civic integration with the Jewish state and counters anti-Israel narratives in Western Christian media. According to the organization's introductory literature, the ICV is “dedicated to strengthening and promoting the status of the Christian community in the State of Israel, while striving for international recognition.” Its activities include “fostering solidarity between Jews and Christians” and “nurturing peaceful and brotherly relations with all sectors.” In the same presentation, Shlayan declares on behalf of those Israeli Christians he represents, “We see ourselves as part of this state and not as part of those who oppose it,”⁴¹ recog-

nizing that the Christian community can live and practice its faith safely in the State of Israel, in contrast to persecuted Christians in most other nations of the Middle East.



Lt. Col. (res.) Ihab Shlayan, founder of Israeli Christian Voice, attained the rank of lieutenant colonel, making him the highest-ranking Christian officer in IDF history. Shlayan advocates the civic and military integration of Israel's Christian community and was a principal target of the Jerusalem church leaders' January 2026 statement against Christian Zionism. (Credit: Wadkh/Wikimedia Commons, CC BY 4.0)

At the same time, Shlayan has been an outspoken advocate for the rights of Christians in Israel, pressing the government with a concrete agenda: official recognition of Christians as a distinct community separate from Muslim Arabs; equal access to employment and scholarships for those who serve; a dedicated pedagogical division for Christian education; IDF recruitment infrastructure; a memorial for the 29 Christians who have fallen in service; adequate representation in state institutions; improved governance and security in Arab-majority cities; and support for Christians in Judea, Samaria, Gaza, and Syria.⁴²

The alarm of the patriarchs intensified after Shlayan's January 9, 2026, meeting with Huckabee at the U.S. Embassy in Jerusalem, at which the two discussed future courses of action with the Trump administration on behalf of Israeli Christians. Shlayan argues that the anti-Zionist statement was initiated by the Greek Orthodox Patriarchate under direct pressure from the Palestinian Authority and Jordan's Islamic Waqf (religious endowment authority), which administers the Muslim holy sites of East

Jerusalem. As Shlayan put it, "Those who control the entire Patriarchate and all of East Jerusalem are the Jordanian Waqf and the Palestinian Authority."⁴³

Scholars have framed the underlying conflict as two competing minority survival strategies. PLT seeks safety through solidarity with Arab society and resistance to the Jewish state. The Aramean movement pursues what some have called "Druzification from below": a bottom-up strategy of civic and military integration with Israel, modeled on the successful integration of the Druze community.⁴⁴

Conclusion: Tensions, Opportunities, and Challenges

The controversy ignited by the January 2026 statement reflects a genuine and deepening fault line within Christianity in the Holy Land—one that has been building for over a decade. On one side stands Palestinian Liberation Theology: solidarity with Palestinian national aspirations, resistance to Israel and Zionism, and Christian-Muslim unity rooted in shared suffering. On the other stands an emerging movement of Israeli Christians who reject the Palestinian Arab identity ascribed to them, embrace civic integration with the Jewish state, and argue that Zionism is not their oppressor but their best guarantee of survival in a hostile region.

The movement represented by Naddaf, Khalloul, and Shlayan is small in absolute numbers—some 15,000 Aramean Christians in Israel⁴⁵—but it is symbolically and strategically significant and is gaining strength and support among other Israeli Christians. It challenges the longstanding polarization that has pitted Israeli Jews against a united Christian-Muslim Arab front and offers Israel a potential bridge to Western Christian opinion at a moment when that opinion is shifting in troubling directions.

Three conclusions follow from this analysis, challenging three groups: Catholic commentators, Christians in the Holy Land, and the Israeli government. First, the worldwide reaction of Catholic pundits who assumed that the patriarchs were articulating timeless Christian doctrine was entirely misguided. In fact, the patriarchs' statement was an example of Middle East realpolitik—or,

as Shadi Khalloul put it, “a confession that Christians are persecuted by Arab Islamic governments” and a product of “dhimmi mentality” that hopes to find protection from the same governments.⁴⁶ The Jerusalem church hierarchy has for decades been subject to pressure from the Palestinian Authority and Jordan’s Waqf, which effectively controls the Greek Orthodox Patriarchate and the Muslim holy sites of East Jerusalem. According to that view, the patriarchs’ reflexive hostility to Christian Zionism can be interpreted less as a statement of universal Christian theology than as a continuation of a longstanding minority survival strategy: submission to the dominant Muslim political order in exchange for toleration. Catholic commentators who rushed to endorse the statement as “the Catholic view” displayed both a superficial understanding of Catholic teaching on Israel and failed to grasp the political context in which the statement was produced. Will Catholic pundits learn from this and exercise more prudence before drawing sweeping theological conclusions from what are, in the end, political statements?

Second, the two divergent movements within Christianity in the Holy Land confront not only the patriarchs and heads of churches but all local Christians—Israeli and Palestinian—with a decisive choice: Will they continue on the path of resistance and opposition to the Jewish state as articulated in PLT, along with the policy of appeasing Arab and Muslim actors in the Middle East—a path that has yielded few if any results since 1948—or will they find the courage to follow the new path pioneered by Naddaf, Khalloul, and Shlayan, working with the Jewish state rather than against it? This path has already produced concrete gains: legal recognition, constructive dialogue with the U.S. ambassador and Israeli government, and better integration in Israeli society.

Third, the movement of pro-Israel Israeli Christians presents a potential strategic opportunity for the State of Israel to forge a genuine alliance with its own Christian citizens, to demonstrate to the Western Christian world that the Jewish state and Christian communities share not only deep theological roots but also common strategic interests, and to show that the story of Christianity in the

Holy Land is not one of Zionist oppression but of flourishing under Jewish sovereignty. That story, told by the likes of Naddaf, Khalloul, and Shlayan, is one of the most compelling arguments for Israel that exists in the current global climate. To capitalize on this, the Israeli government should formally recognize the Christian community as a distinct minority, address the ICV’s concrete demands on education, security, and military service, and actively amplify these voices in its international Christian outreach.

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The opportunity comes with obligations. Israeli Christian leaders have identified concrete, unresolved grievances: rampant organized crime in Arab-majority cities without an adequate law enforcement response; extremist settler attacks on Christian communities such as Taybeh in the West Bank; the lack of adequate representation, educational autonomy, IDF recruitment infrastructure, and a memorial for fallen Christian soldiers. These are practical tests of whether the partnership Shlayan and Khalloul propose is real or rhetorical.

The patriarchs’ statement reflects the anxiety of an established hierarchy whose authority and narrative are being contested from within. But the movement it targeted will not disappear. As Khalloul’s invocation of Herzl’s motto suggests, “If you will it, it is no dream”; these are communities with a vision and a long memory. Will the State of Israel seize this opportunity or squander it?

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