

Mideast Christian leaders to Trump: Jerusalem move could have dire results

JERUSALEM — In an open letter to U.S. President Donald Trump, Christian leaders in Jerusalem said U.S. recognition of the city as the capital of Israel could have dire regional consequences.

“We have been following, with concern, the reports about the possibility of changing how the United States understands and deals with the status of Jerusalem. We are certain that such steps will yield increased hatred, conflict, violence and suffering in Jerusalem and the Holy Land, moving us farther from the goal of unity and deeper toward destructive division,” the Christian leaders said, just hours before Trump announced the U.S. was recognizing Jerusalem as the capital and relocating the U.S. embassy.

They appealed to Trump to take their viewpoint into consideration, as did the leaders who met at Camp David in July 2000 to decide the status of Jerusalem. The Christian leaders said their “solemn advice and plea” for the president was to continue recognizing the international status of Jerusalem.

“We ask you, Mr. President, to help us all walk toward more love and a definitive peace, which cannot be reached without Jerusalem being for all,” they said Dec. 6.

“Any sudden changes would cause irreparable harm. We are confident that, with strong support from our friends, Israelis and Palestinians can work toward negotiating a sustainable and just peace, benefiting all who long for the Holy City of Jerusalem to fulfill its destiny.”

The Christian leaders, who include Catholic and Orthodox patriarchs as well as the Franciscan custos of the Holy Land, said Jerusalem could be “shared and fully enjoyed” once a political process helped “liberate the hearts of all people that live

within it from the conditions of conflict and destructiveness that they are experiencing.”

With Christmas approaching they asked that Jerusalem “not be deprived” of peace; they wished Trump a Merry Christmas and asked that he help them “listen to the song of the angels.”

“As the Christian leaders of Jerusalem, we invite you to walk with us in hope as we build a just, inclusive peace for all the peoples of this unique and Holy City,” they said.

In 1967, Israel annexed East Jerusalem, which had been under Jordanian control since 1948. In 1980 Israel declared a united Jerusalem as its capital. Palestinians see East Jerusalem as the future capital of an independent Palestine.

Earlier Dec. 6, Pope Francis **expressed concern** that a U.S. move recognizing Jerusalem as the capital would further destabilize the Middle East.

The internationally unsettled status of Jerusalem and its central importance to Jews, Muslims and Christians explains why, while recognizing the state of Israel, no nation has its embassy in the holy city. Since the early 1990s, the Vatican has called for a special status for the city. It has insisted the political question of the city’s status must be the result of negotiation.

Wadie Abunassar, chairman of media relations for the Christian leaders, said the status of Jerusalem is not only an issue for Israelis and Palestinians, but also for other Muslim countries as well. He noted that already a gathering of Arab foreign ministers has been organized for Dec. 11 as well as a meeting prepared by Turkey for Muslim countries.

“Jerusalem is a sensitive issue for all, so the Christian leaders, (following) the pope, are making an appeal to President Trump to be wise — there is a need for wisdom ... especially in such an explosive situation,” he said.

With violent demonstrations already in evidence even before any announcement had been made, Abunassar said more steps that produce confidence-building measures are needed rather than steps that “add oil to the flame.”

Hamas, the Palestinian Islamic political party with an armed faction, called for more protests in the coming days, particularly Dec. 8, the Muslim day of prayer. The U.S. labels Hamas a terrorist organization.

In Lebanon, Abdul Latif Derian, grand mufti of Lebanon's Sunni Muslims, called on Arab Islamic leaders to counter the U.S. embassy's relocation to preserve the Arab identity of Jerusalem. The mufti is an important figure for Sunni Muslims, not just locally but regionally. Most of the Palestinian population in the region is Sunni Muslim.

"The transfer of the U.S. Embassy to Jerusalem and the recognition of the Holy City as the capital of Israel is a blatant challenge and provocation to the feelings of Palestinians, Arabs and Muslims," the mufti said in a statement Dec. 6. "This step would turn the region into a flame of conflicts that will inevitably lead to disastrous consequences and would adversely affect the region and the international community. This will have serious repercussions on the Arab and Islamic region."

"The recognition of Jerusalem as the capital of Israel is unacceptable and represents a step toward the elimination of the Palestinian cause, which will not be allowed by Arabs and Muslims," the mufti said, calling to confront the Israeli enemy in various ways.

"Confrontation is a legitimate right aiming to defend the occupied land of Palestine," he said.

Contributing to this story was Doreen Abi Raad in Beirut.

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