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PEACE AT LAST

A complex agreement involving many parties may, at long last, give peace a chance in the Middle East

By Anne Shearer

Jubilation resounded in Tel Aviv's Hostages Square on October 13th as a livestream showed the 20 living Hamas-held hostages returning to Israel. In the southern Gaza Strip, crowds of people greeted buses returning some 1,700 Palestinian detainees. Israel also agreed to release 250 Palestinian prisoners.

The hostages' release came roughly two weeks after U.S. President Donald Trump proposed a peace deal for the region. Several deceased hostages were

also returned (at the time of writing), with tensions surrounding Hamas's admission of delays recovering some bodies lost in the rubble. According to *The Times of Israel*, Israel had returned some of the hundreds of deceased Palestinians in its custody.

The White House Rapid Response posted Trump's 20-point peace plan on September 29th, which included guidelines for hostage and prisoner exchanges and gradual IDF withdrawal from the Gaza Strip. It outlined plans for a transitional government and reform in Gaza, stating there may be "a credible pathway to Palestinian self-determination and statehood" once the reforms have taken place.

Following Trump's post, Qatar, Jordan, United Arab Emirates, Indone-

sia, Pakistan, Türkiye, Saudi Arabia, and Egypt released a joint statement welcoming the proposal. The Muslim-majority nations emphasized the "delivery of sufficient humanitarian aid to Gaza, [and] no displacement of the Palestinians."

By the end of the week, Palestine President Mahmoud Abbas pledged to hold elections within a year of the war's end and stated officials were working on a temporary constitution "serving as the basis for the transition from authority to state."

According to a post from Trump on October 3rd, Hamas agreed to release "all occupation prisoners—both living and remains." The group stated approval of "hand[ing] over the administration of the Gaza Strip to a Palestinian body of independents (technocrats)," adding it would contribute to future discussions "concerning the future of the Gaza Strip and the unalienable rights of the Palestinian people."

On October 10th the Israeli government voted to approve the first phase of the plan including release of hostages and Palestinian prisoners. Israeli forces withdrew to an agreed-upon line, beginning the 72-hour countdown for hostages to be released. A government official told *The Times of Israel* that they had not approved an end to the war.

Meanwhile, Palestinians started returning to Gaza city, many to destroyed homes and neighborhoods, though "the road is long and difficult," schoolteacher Alaa Saleh told the BBC. 





ST. CATHERINE'S MONASTERY: WHOSE HOLY GROUND?

Chaos and confusion engulf St. Catherine's Monastery in Egypt, as fears of a government takeover spark authority disputes within the compound.

By Anne Shearer

In May, monks at St. Catherine's Monastery, located at the foot of Mount Sinai on the Sinai Peninsula, closed its doors to protest and pray in response to an Egyptian government ruling claiming ownership of the monastery grounds. Orthodox believers worldwide expressed concern for the monastery's security, which has been submitting unrecognized proofs of ownership to the Egyptian government since 1980. Concerns over the monastery's security were exacerbated by Egypt's Great Transfiguration Project, a tourism-boosting initiative that began developing the remote St. Catherine's area in 2021. In response to global outcry over the monastery's safety, the Greek Parliament voted to recognize St. Catherine's as a legal entity. Greece then initiated diplomatic talks with Egypt to help secure the monastery's autonomy.

Dating to the 6th century, St. Catherine's is a revered pilgrimage site, housing world-renowned icons, ancient


manuscripts, and a bush traditionally identified as the biblical burning bush from which God spoke to Moses. The monastery operates as an autonomous Orthodox church, presumed to be under the overarching jurisdiction of Patriarch Theophilus III of Jerusalem. However, about two months after the May ruling, 15 monks at St. Catherine's notified the Jerusalem Patriarch that they had voted to depose the monastery's 91-year-old Abbot, Damianos. In response, Damianos sent a letter to Jerusalem, asserting that the Patriarch had no jurisdiction over the monastery. He accused the monks of factionalism and sedition, among other charges, and called them to repentance.

On August 26, Damianos returned to the monastery, claiming he surprised the rebellious monks and expelled them with the help of three loyal monks and several Bedouin assistants.

He alleged the monks were meeting to illegally amend the monastery's operational rules, which requires his presence, and told the *National Herald* that "the coup-plotting monks attacked and manhandled me." The monks, however, claimed that "the deposed Archbishop, the former Sinai Damianos, suddenly appeared at the monastery after a long absence, accompanied by about ten thugs, and entered the monastery." They alleged the intruders forcibly removed

monks from their cells, breaking down locked doors. "What the bishop claimed in his letter about being assaulted by the fathers is a colossal lie, as the fathers never even saw him. He remained in his office, merely watching the drama unfold," they stated. A video recorded by a monk from across the courtyard shows a group of people on an upper floor of the monastery. With flashlights and frequent shouting, the group enters a room and exits moments later, allegedly evicting the monk inside. *The Orthodox Times* condemned the unrest, noting that the monastery's "canonical framework" provides guidelines for resolving such disputes. It suggested that Abbot Damianos, having served for over 50 years, "should understand that it is time to step down," and urged the brotherhood to wait with "obedience and patience."



By early September, Archbishop Damianos announced he would step down, stating, "Since it is now clear that the Holy Sinai Brotherhood agrees on the strategic goals and tactical methods for addressing the existential crisis facing the monastery to which I have dedicated my life, the time has come for me to take responsibility and ensure the succession process." At the time of writing, no successor had been named, but the Greek and Egyptian governments were nearing agreement on a deal protecting the Monastery and surrounding area, which are a UNESCO World Heritage Site. It was unclear whether construction would continue on the sprawling tourist resort Egypt was building in the nearby Plain of el-Raha. 



GOD'S KINGDOM OVER POLITICS

A recent IRS settlement weakens a ban on political campaigning by churches. Ex Fonte spoke with three pastors on Massachusetts' North Shore to hear their thoughts on politics in the pulpit.

The 1954 Johnson Amendment states that 501(c)(3) charities may lose their tax-exempt status if they engage in political endorsements or campaigns. In September 2024, some churches and religious advocacy groups in Texas filed a lawsuit alleging the Johnson Amendment violated their rights to Free Speech and Due Process (because the IRS didn't evenly enforce it). This summer, the IRS agreed that the plaintiffs could endorse candidates if it was done within their normal means of communication and in connection to their faith beliefs.

Rev. Adam Isbitsky, a Congregational pastor in the Boston area, says that the Johnson Amendment is important for protecting the separation of Church and State. If the Johnson Amendment weakens, he fears "churches might become expected to make political endorsements" and be targeted by unhappy politicians if they refuse to take a side.

Pastor Bobby Warrenburg emphasizes local involvement rather than national politics. His congregants are active in child adoption, prison, special needs, and food bank ministries. "We're trying to seek the good of our community," he said, "which is what politics is supposed to be doing."

Pastor Aaron Rios says, "I don't feel a ministerial obligation to campaign or promote a candidate. I feel like it's my ministerial obligation to communicate Kingdom principles." He says some of his congregants might be happy to see him endorse a candidate, "but I'm not going to get on the platform to do that."

The pulpit is a "sacred desk," says Rios, and he doesn't want to shift its purpose. "I equip people with what I believe are Kingdom qualities. It is their responsibility to then internalize that and base their conviction off of that, and then make a decision." He worries about "a new wave of divide" if political speech in church becomes the norm. 🇺🇸

EUROPEAN PERSECUTION MOUNTS

In 2024, France saw an average of five churches robbed every week. Arson attempts against churches in France increased 30 percent in 2024. Despite the rise in robbery and arson, media organization *Europe1* reported the overall number of anti-Christian incidents dropped by 10 percent between 2023 to 2024. According to the most recent data from Observatory on Intolerance and Discrimination Against Christians Europe (OIDAC Europe), in 2023, France led Europe with the highest number of anti-Christian incidents (nearly 1,000).



These numbers highlight an overall trend in Europe, which has seen a consistent increase in anti-Christian hate crimes over the past 15 years. OIDAC Europe's last report showed the U.K. followed France with 702 anti-Christian attacks, while Germany witnessed a 105 percent increase in anti-Christian incidents. The report states this number is likely higher, because instances of church vandalism in Germany aren't categorized as "anti-Christian" unless a clear religious or political motive is expressly proven.



OIDAC Europe typically releases its annual Intolerance and Discrimination Against Christians in Europe Report in mid-November on the International Day of Tolerance. The 2025 report will synthesize data from 2024. 🇪🇺

Anne Shearer is a news writer for this magazine.