



Who holds the deed to the Promised Land?

On Sunday mornings, the shops are shuttered in the Christian quarter of Jerusalem's Old City. Except for peeling church bells, the serpentine alleys and courtyards are quiet as Christians hurry along the cobblestone streets into more than a dozen houses of worship.

The oldest of these, the Church of the Holy Sepulcher, marks the place where Jesus' body was thought to have been laid after being removed from the cross. Its mélange of architectural elements—Byzantine, Crusader and Greek—parallel the diversity of worship inside. According to a 1752 Ottoman Turkish edict, seven Christian groups own specific parts of the Holy Sepulcher Church, among them Roman Catholics, Armenians and Egyptian Copts.

The largest sanctuary, a cavernous room known as the Catholicos or Hall of Greeks, belongs to the Greek Orthodox Church. Several priests, wearing white shawls embroidered with blue crosses, chant the liturgy. One swings a filigreed censer hanging from a long chain, leaving plumes of richly scented smoke in his wake. Throughout the service, the black-robed bishop, sitting in an elaborately carved wooden throne, aims his jewel-encrusted cross at the worshippers—among them nuns, tourists and several locals reading from Arabic prayer books. Their supplications vie with a chorus of voices rising from the Egyptian Copts who are praying in their own dim corner of the church.

The Greek Orthodox appear undisturbed by the competing Copts. They consider themselves the highest-ranking Christian denomination in the Holy Land, tracing their roots back to the Roman

Emperor Constantine who first built the Holy Sepulcher Church in 325 C.E. Their sanctuary encompasses the spot, marked by a large stone urn, that the Greek Orthodox believe to be the center of the world.

"Who built the church? Who first took care of it?" asks Timothy Margaritis, a Greek Orthodox leader known as Metropolitan Bishop Timothy of Vostra. At 53 years old, he has lived in Israel for 30 years. His face is handsome beneath graying wavy hair, and his serious brown eyes are crowned by bushy eyebrows. "There are Greek inscriptions everywhere. That says something, doesn't it?"

The Greek Orthodox Church is not just a major player in the Christian world. It has resources and power in modern-day Israel that far outweigh the fact that it has only about 200,000 followers there—power that few Israelis, or Jews

Metropolitan Bishop Timothy of Vostra stands before the Church of the Holy Sepulcher (left). A sixth century Christian map with Greek inscriptions depicts Jerusalem (below).





TODD SOLEN

Jerusalem's Church of the Holy Sepulcher combines elements of Byzantine, Crusader and Greek architecture. According to an Ottoman decree, seven Christian sects, including the Greek Orthodox, share ownership of the Church.

around the world, can imagine. Influence in the Holy Land, as the Church has always known, boils down to ownership of property. "Property plays a major role in a community," says Metropolitan Timothy, "if it is attached to a religious place." Using this criterion, the Greek Orthodox Church may indeed be the

land in Jerusalem. Ministries, hotels, entire blocks of apartment buildings, all are on land leased from the Church. Even the Israel Museum, the King David Hotel and the Knesset, Israel's seat of government, are on Church-owned land.

When it comes to the Greek Orthodox Church and real estate, the Israeli

The Greek Orthodox Church is not just a major player in the Christian world. Unbeknownst to many, it has power in modern-day Israel that far outweighs the fact that it has only about 200,000 followers there, mostly Arabs.

second most powerful entity in Israel, after the Israeli government.

For unbeknownst to many, the Church owns large swaths of land throughout Israel and, according to the Jewish National Fund, at least 50 percent of the

government tends to keep its mouth shut, opting to remain silent about a very uncertain matter. Since 1948 the Church and the Israeli government have generally maintained good relations. But lately, new tension has developed between

the State of Israel and its largest landowner—the Church that controls the tomb where Jesus is said to be buried and whose congregants are largely Arabs. "The fear in the government is that in 50 years, Israel will find itself with a Patriarchate of Arabs that will in theory own 50 percent of the land downtown," says Jerusalem's Kobi Bier, a Jerusalem real estate appraiser and a local expert on the Church's land holdings.

This fear has been all the more pronounced since August 2001 when the Church appointed Patriarch Irineos I, a leader considered to be pro-Palestinian. The new Patriarch was so controversial that Israel refused to recognize his status for more than two years.

How the Greek Orthodox Church became one of the most influential landlords in Jerusalem is a story of medieval luck, good timing and a certain stubbornness. In the often strange politics of Israel, where religion and land are enmeshed in an existential struggle, the Greek Orthodox have two major advantages: longevity and real estate. They've been living in this corner of the Middle East for at least 1,500 years.

The Greek Orthodox Church belongs to a family of more than a dozen Orthodox churches including, among others, those of Russia, Bulgaria, Cyprus, Romania and North America. Of all of these, the Greek Orthodox is the most ancient. Despite its name, the Church did not begin within the boundaries of modern day Greece. Instead, it traces its origins back to the earliest years of Christianity, before the Great Schism that created the Catholic Church in 1054—a time when the entire Eastern Mediterranean was dominated by Greek civilization. The word orthodox is itself Greek in origin, meaning "right believing."

As Christianity spread throughout the Middle East and North Africa, it remained tightly intertwined with Greek

language and culture. The five largest metropolitan areas in the region—Jerusalem, Rome, Antioch, Alexandria and Constantinople—became the major centers of the Christian religion. After the Great Schism, Catholicism settled in Rome while the Orthodox Church maintained its Patriarchates in the four other cities under the watchful eye of Muslims.

In 1099, Catholic Crusaders expelled the Jerusalem Patriarchates, who fled to Constantinople. By the time Muslim rule was restored in 1187 and the Greek Orthodox returned to the Holy Land, it had other Christian company. Jerusalem was also home to the Catholic Church as well as to other eastern churches such as the Armenian, Syrian and Coptic.

It wasn't until 1516, when the Turkish Ottomans came to power in Palestine, that the Patriarchate felt comfortable reestablishing itself as the ruling church in the Holy Land. The Ottomans and the Greek Orthodox Church were culturally similar and shared a capitol—Constantinople. The Church Patriarch of Jerusalem maintained a strong presence in Constantinople, raising money from Orthodox believers there, as well as in the Balkans and Czarist Russia, in order to safeguard Greek Orthodox status in Palestine.

The Ottomans ruled for 400 years, officially through the end of World War I. But the empire was already crumbling in the 1800s, and Palestine fell into a state of widespread neglect—large chunks of the land were owned by absentee landlords and leased to poor tenant farmers. As the empire slowly collapsed, the Turks began selling off land in Jerusalem. The estimated 1,000 Jewish families who lived in the country throughout Ottoman rule were not wealthy enough to buy much land. So the Turks sold to the British, French, Germans, Russians and even Americans. They especially favored the Greeks, a community they had more in common with than the other Europeans. In 1845,

having purchased a significant portion of the Holy Land, the Greek Orthodox Patriarch followed in the footsteps of the earlier Roman rulers, renovating ruined churches and opening abandoned monasteries in and around Jerusalem.

By the early 1920s, the majority of what is now downtown Jerusalem including what is now the Ben Yehuda pedestrian mall—as well as the elegant residential neighborhoods of Talbieh and Rehavia (home to the Prime Minister's official residence)—belonged to the Greek Orthodox Church. If we're making lists, the Church possessed 23 churches and monasteries in the Old City, extensive compounds on the Mount of Olives and Mount Zion, and monasteries in what is now part of suburban Jerusalem, as well as more than a dozen churches and monasteries throughout Israel.

The Greek Orthodox Church has always had its financial ups and downs. When it began to go bankrupt in the early 1920s—a situation that has repeated itself several times in the Church's history—the British, who were then in power in Palestine, forced it to sell off pieces of land to the Yishuv, Israel's pre-statehood government in Palestine. For the Yishuv, the timing couldn't have been better. They were just then in the process of sniffing around for available land throughout Palestine, and most of their purchases had been arid regions used for farming cooperatives, the moshav and the kibbutz.

After Israel declared its statehood in

1948, the Greek Orthodox Church began renting out what remained of its Jerusalem real estate to the Jewish State. In 1952, the Patriarchate created three 100-year rental contracts for property in Talbieh, Rehavia and Naot (a neighborhood near the Knesset) and along Hebron Road, which borders the neighborhoods in southern Jerusalem. The package included the land on which the Knesset and Israel Museum, as well as the Great Synagogue and Hechal Shlomo synagogue on King George Street, are located. The contracts were signed with the Jewish National Fund, an organization set up by the Yishuv to handle Jewish land purchases, and allowed for a 99-year renewal.



TODD BOLEN

The Greek Orthodox trace their presence in Jerusalem to the Emperor Constantine, who built the Church of the Holy Sepulcher in 325 C.E. Their sanctuary, the Catholicon, is the largest.

“At that point in the state's short lifetime, 100 years was considered to be a long time,” tells Avraham Hilleli, a retired lawyer who ran the land department in JNF. “But 50 years went by in an hour, a minute.”

Some of the Church contracts with the government offered a renewal option. Others didn't. Even with the renewal option, the contracts stipulate that when renewed, the rental price will be based on the property's current value, an arrangement that could wreak havoc in Jerusalem's already overpriced real estate market.

The contracts have created a steady stream of revenue for the Church. "When they needed money, they drew up new contracts," says Kobi Bier, the local Church real estate expert.

The management of Church land is controlled by the Holy Synod, the 18 bishops who make up the Patriarchate's "board of directors," but it is the Patriarch who has always signed off on all transactions, and it is has always been in his interest to fiercely guard every dunam in the Patriarchate's possession.

The late Patriarch Diodoros I was known to say that the reason the Patriarchate has lasted for more than 1,500 years in Jerusalem is because it religiously guards its real estate. "We don't give up a millimeter," he said.

The Patriarchate is famous for its tenaciousness. In the early 1990s, it fought with the religious trust known as the Muslim Waqf over two small rooms within the Hanqa Mosque, which is adjacent to a hall of the Church of the Holy Sepulcher. While renovating the mosque, the Waqf commandeered the two neglected rooms, and when Diodoros found out, he was prepared to go to battle over them. At the time, the late Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin had just signed the Oslo peace accords with Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat and was being criticized for giving up part of the Jewish homeland. In one television interview, Rabin defended himself declaring, "Zionism is not immovable property."

When Diodoros heard Rabin's comment, he had advice for the Jewish leader. "If you see Yitzhak Rabin, tell him I said the only important thing is

real estate, just real estate," he said. "What is Zionism anyway, if not Judaism plus real estate?"

Jerusalem's tony Talbieh neighborhood is one of the city's most sought after places to live—even though it's on land owned by the Greek Orthodox Church. Talbieh has long been a prestigious address for English-speaking Jews, a fact reflected in its street names: Washington, Lincoln, Disraeli.

In 1994, David Zwebner, who was born in England and raised in South Africa, bought a three-story house on Marcus Street. His home has high ceilings, smooth marble floors and a verdant flower-filled back garden. Like many others in the neighborhood, it was built in an Arab style and previously inhabited by monks.

Zwebner, an assets manager whose job involves buying, selling and trading futures in a highly speculative market, believes property in Talbieh is a good investment. While Jerusalem and the rest of Israel have been hit with an ongoing recession for the last few years, real estate purchases are still considered

a good investment because of the steady demand for Holy Land properties. As in other desirable Jerusalem neighborhoods, Talbieh real estate values have skyrocketed over the last decades, pricing simple two-bedroom apartments at \$200,000 and unattached villas at several million dollars.

The residence on Marcus Street is not the only Talbieh property that Zwebner owns. In 1971, he and his wife paid \$62,500 for a five-room, 160-square meter apartment on nearby Sokolov Street. The flat is now valued at \$500,000.

"I would have sold it if there was a problem," he says. "But I remember clearly being told that there is nothing to worry about because everything in Talbieh is on Church-owned land and the government would never allow the land to revert back to Church ownership. There's safety in numbers."

Still, Church-owned properties are priced and valued lower because of the uncertainty regarding the property's future. Although homeowners like David Zwebner may own an apartment or house, they don't own the land.

Real estate agents make a point of explaining the land's complicated ownership to prospective buyers. "I tell people ahead of time if property is Church-owned, and I make sure they understand the meaning of a 19-, 20- or 50-year lease," said Alyssa Friedland, the proprietor for ReMax real estate in Jerusalem. "But money is key. If people can get a good price, sometimes they're willing to take the risk."

There are two different kinds of leases. In one, homeowners lease the land directly from the Greek Orthodox Church. In the other, more common, homeowners sub-lease the land through the Israel Lands Administration (ILA), which has in turn leased it from the Church. The difference between the two is crucial. The general belief among most real estate experts is that the Church will



Israel recognized Irineos I as the Greek Orthodox Church Patriarch after two years of controversy.

renew its leases with the government. The cost of leasing, based on market value, is likely to rise dramatically, but the ILA protects the Israeli owner, and the government will almost definitely take responsibility for leases in which the Administration is involved.

Land leased directly from the Church may be more problematic, says Alan Deco, a Jerusalem real estate broker who co-owns Capital Property Consultants. With many of the leases due to expire in 48 years, no one is quite sure what will happen come 2052.

Whatever the Church decides, it seems unlikely that any Israeli homeowner will be thrown out on the street. Deco explains that the government could enact a law allowing those on Church-owned land to buy the freeholds of their property for a symbolic or substantially discounted sum. Another possibility is that the ILA will negotiate extensions to all the leases. For now, though, neither the government nor the ILA has made any public statements regarding Church leases coming to term. (The ILA refused to comment for this story.)

At the same time, some buyers hesitate to purchase these kinds of leases because no one knows what the Church will do. "The problem is real," says Bier, whose father's office was on Church-owned property with a 100-year lease

From the very beginning, Irineos' appointment has been surrounded by intrigue and complication. As soon as Diodoros died, leaders of the Greek Orthodox Church drew up a list of 15 new candidates for the Patriarchy. They dutifully followed a sixth century law, dating back to the Emperor Justinian, declaring that the Holy Land has the right to approve or disqualify candidates for the office of Patriarch. To the Greek Orthodox, that meant submitting their candidates to all three governments that now claim political status in Jerusalem: Israel, Jordan and the Palestinian Authority.

Reviewing the list, the Jordanian government was at first reluctant to accept Metropolitan Timothy, despite the fact that he had effectively governed the Church during the years Diodoros lay bedridden. According to East Jerusalem newspapers, Jordan believed that Timothy had sympathy for Israel



The Greek Orthodox Church of the Seven Apostles sits beside the Sea of Galilee in the ancient fishing village of Capernaum, where Jesus was said to have performed many miracles.

For more than two years, the Israeli government would not officially recognize Irineos' status—a fact that prevented the Patriarch from conducting national business such as obtaining a bank account or a travel visa.

The reasons for Israel's vehement objection have never been detailed to the public. Because Irineos previously served as the Jerusalem Church's representative in Greece, Israeli officials may have feared that he shared the Greek government's views on Israel. During the 1980s, newspapers published by PASOK, Greece's ruling socialist party, compared Israel to the Nazis and called for a boycott of all Jewish-owned shops. Although Greece and Israel later developed a strong trade relationship, Greece remains an outspoken critic of Israeli policy.

Another concern involved rumored dealings with the Palestinian Liberation Organization. In April 2002, Member of Knesset Uri Ariel accused Irineos of

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The delicate land situation was fairly stable until Irineos, considered pro-Palestinian, was appointed Patriarch.

that is up in 2035. "There are people who won't buy because no one can promise the land will be theirs."

The delicate land situation seemed fairly stable until a couple of years ago. After the death of Diodoros in December 2000, Emmanuel Skopelitis, now known as Irineos I, was appointed Patriarch.

and, in fact, intended to sell Church land to the Jews. Israeli officials, in turn, refused to approve Irineos. In the end, Israel's Supreme Court overruled the government's attempt to block Irineos along with four other candidates. But when Irineos was elected 140th Patriarch on August 13, 2001, Israel sent no representatives to the ornate ceremony held at the Church of the Holy Sepulcher.

inciting Palestinians in the West Bank and Gaza Strip to violence. These objections came to the forefront three months later when Father Atalla Hanna, speaking as a representative of Irineos' Patriarch, delivered a controversial lecture before the Arab League think tank in Abu-Dhabi. "The Church fully supports the resistance for the sake of liberation from Israel," Hanna declared. He noted that "some freedom fighters adopt martyrdom or suicide bombings, while others opt for other measures" and assured his audience that the Church was "in the struggle, whether it is martyrdom or any other means."

Irineos' aide quickly condemned the statements, and Hanna was removed from office, but the Arab Orthodox community demanded that Hanna remain the Church's official mouthpiece. In a written statement, they threatened that "unexpected measures" would be taken if Irineos did not rescind his decision within 24 hours.

Around the same time, a more dramatic piece of evidence surfaced, seemingly proving Irineos' anti-Israel sentiments beyond any doubt. The newspaper *Ma'ariv* ran a letter apparently sent from the Patriarch to Yasser Arafat in July 2001. The letter condemned both the Jewish people and the State of Israel in alarmingly strong language: "You are finally aware of the sentiments of disgust and disrespect that all the Holy Sepulchre fathers are feeling for the descendents of the crucifiers of our Lord Jesus Christ, actual crucifiers of your people, Zionist [sic] Jewish conquerors of the Holy Land of Palestine."

To the relief of some and the disappointment of others, the letter was declared a forgery in June 2002 by the Shin Bet, Israel's domestic security agency. But in May 2003, the Patriarch's story underwent another bizarre twist: Irineos accused Metropolitan Timothy of plotting his assassination. London's

Guardian newspaper reported Irineos' claims that a Palestinian named Yuseff al-Mufdi had allegedly been offered \$500,000 to arrange the hit-squad killing. Irineos bypassed the Holy Land altogether and brought his case straight to a court in Athens—according to one unnamed source within the Church, his claims would not have been taken seriously by the Israeli, Palestinian or Jordanian authorities. The case currently lies dormant, but Metropolitan Timothy has told Greek newspapers he is pushing the case forward, not wanting to leave a vague accusation hanging over his head.

On January 25, 2004, the State of Israel finally recognized Irineos as Patriarch. The change of heart inspired a good deal of speculation, all the more so because Prime Minister Ariel Sharon had expressed support for Irineos' Patriarchy as early as April 2002, against the wishes of his cabinet. On January 21, 2004, just a few days before Israel recognized Irineos, Sharon was charged with accepting bribes four years earlier from David Appel, an Israeli developer building a resort on the Greek island of Patroklos. Israeli newspapers, among them *Yediot Ahronot* and *Ha'aretz*, implied that Sharon may have stood behind Irineos because the Church knew too much. The Church's significant landholdings are not limited to Israel; it is a major landowner on Patroklos as well.

Despite the fact that Irineos is considered a friend to the Palestinians, there is and always has been sharp tension between the heads of the Patriarchate and the members of the local Arab community. Although the majority of believers in Israel are Arabs, Patriarchate leaders are all priests originally from Greece, as stipulated by the Church. (The Church became more closely associated with the actual state of Greece during the Byzantine period, when Greece became the

first country to give liberties to Christians.) A repeated complaint has been that the local Arabic-speaking clergy are unable to advance in the Church hierarchy and are thus barred from entry to the Holy Synod. Irineos has repeatedly denied that senior positions are closed to Palestinian priests.

But with the diminishing number of Greek believers in Israel, and a growing constituency of Palestinian Orthodox, the Patriarchate has to sympathize with the Palestinians, says one former Church brother who asked not to be identified. "That means to be against the Israelis," he explains. "If Arafat and the Palestinians ever take over, it will be a Palestinian Patriarchate, not Greek. You can be sure of that."

As for Irineos, he has repeatedly declared that he is non-partisan. "I am not pro-Palestinian, nor pro-Israeli, nor pro-anything," he told *The Jerusalem Post* in 2001. "I am only pro-God."

When push comes to shove, Irineos will have to make a deal with Israel, according to another Church source who asked to remain anonymous. "He kowtows to the Palestinians and to the Israelis, depending on who he's with."

In an interview conducted before Irineos was crowned Patriarch, Metropolitan Timothy stressed that it was important for the Patriarchate not to play favorites concerning the politically volatile real estate situation with the Israeli government. As former secretary general of the Patriarchate, Timothy was involved in all real estate transactions after the Six-Day War. He says now that the Patriarchate gave too much land to Israel for too little compensation, losing out on Jerusalem's skyrocketing real estate values in ensuing years. This was during the days of Teddy Kolk's long-term mayorship over Jerusalem, and relations were relatively good between the government and the Patriarchate.

A spate of drawn-out deals involving too many lawyers, developers and leases turned the relationship sour, making Timothy a raconteur of Jerusalem deals gone bad. He likes to list all the properties leased by the Church to the State for a fraction of their actual value. Still, he doesn't think the Patriarchate's disappointment over its real estate losses will result in a cancellation of the leases.

Given the infighting among the churches, the bickering between the Greeks and Palestinians in the local Church and a long history of bad budgeting in the Church, the leases—at least this time around—are likely to be renewed.

Irineos has said the goal of the Greek Orthodox Patriarchate is to repossess as much land as possible for the Church, but at the same time it will act pragmatically. He has stressed that while the Church intends to renegotiate the leases on these properties, it does not intend to use such negotiations to irritate the State.

"The Church has an obligation to fulfill Israel's demands," says Metropolitan Timothy.

In a country where the government tends to put out fires rather than plan ahead, the Church real estate issue has only begun to simmer. As Timothy points out, "The State could issue a law confiscating all Greek-owned land."

However, he says it is far more likely that the Patriarchate and the Israeli government—both equally tenacious—will hammer out a way to share the land, much in the same way as the Greek Orthodox manage to share space with other Christian sects within the walls of the Old City in the Church of the Holy Sepulcher.

Like others in the know about the Greek Orthodox land holdings, Timothy doubts that the Israeli government will outright confiscate the Church's property. "It won't," Timothy predicts, "because the State of Israel believes in democracy, it respects religion and it accepts the Church in this ancient land." ☪

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