

UK MINISTER VISITS PATRIARCH THEOPHILOS III AMIDST WAR ON GAZA

Jerusalem, The Holy Land
1 November 2023

Lord Tariq Ahmad, Baron Ahmad of Wimbledon, the UK Minister of State for the Middle East, North Africa, South Asia, and the United Nations at the Foreign, Commonwealth, and Development Office, met this morning with His Beatitude Theophilos III, the Patriarch of Jerusalem, at the headquarters of the Orthodox Patriarchate in Jerusalem. The meeting was also attended by His Grace Husam Naoum, the Anglican Archbishop in Jerusalem and Secretary General of the Council of Patriarchs and Heads of Churches in Jerusalem.

The meeting took place against the grim backdrop of the ongoing conflict in the region. Lord Ahmad acknowledged the challenging circumstances, expressing both happiness at the visit and sadness about the ongoing war. He conveyed his deep concern about the atrocities and discussed ways to contribute to the cause of stability and calm. Lord Ahmad recognized the pivotal role that the Church, in collaboration with other religious institutions, plays in the Holy Land. He expressed a readiness to listen to the Patriarch's insights and offered sympathy for the victims of the church bombings in Gaza.

Patriarch Theophilus III, in response, recounted the unfortunate destruction of houses of worship, hospitals, community services centers, schools and residential neighborhoods in Gaza. He highlighted the collective effort of various churches to preserve the multi-cultural and multi-religious character of the Holy Places. Their goal is to ensure these sites remain places of worship, prayer, and reconciliation.

The Patriarch spoke of the struggles confronting Christians in

the Holy Land, facing oppression from radical Israeli groups who seek to expel them from the Holy Land. His Beatitude also stressed the importance of maintaining holy places not only as structures but as living communities, open to members of various religions, contributing to coexistence and peace. The Orthodox Christians actively work to maintain harmony in the holy land, referring to the agreement made in the 7th century between Patriarch Sophronios and Caliph Omar bin Khattab as a historical precedent for coexistence.

The Patriarch underscored the historical role of churches as a safe zone during times of conflict, expressing deep concern for all war victims, including civilians, especially women and children suffering in Gaza.

Lord Ahmad called for a rational and logical approach, transcending emotions, recognizing the sanctity of every human life. The leaders present at the meeting collectively prayed for the avoidance of further escalation aiming to safeguard the land, including Jordan, where the Hashemite King holds the custodianship of Muslim and Christian places in Jerusalem.

Archbishop Husam Naoum of the Anglican also expressed gratitude for the visit, believing it will contribute to calming tensions and promoting peace. He decried the recent events in southern Israel and Gaza, emphasizing the role of religious heritage in finding a political solution. The Archbishop highlighted the importance of preserving the Status Quo of the Holy Places and raised the issue of Al Aqsa, as the holy place for Muslims.



