

Traditional Christianity under the crosshairs of religious radicalism in Israel

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Annotation

The ARVAK Center examines the escalating pressure on traditional Christian communities in Israel. The primary focus is on the incident surrounding the “Cow’s Garden” plot in the Armenian Quarter of Jerusalem, which is viewed as a telling example of a broader anti-Christian policy. It is asserted that Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu’s cabinet, formed in coalition with ultra-radical Jewish factions, is systematically “squeezing out” the Christian factor from the country’s life. This is manifested in legal, economic (tax burdens, property raiding), and social (physical attacks, legislative initiatives) forms of persecution. The role of American “Christian Zionism” is analyzed separately, which, despite its outward solidarity, paradoxically serves the interests of Israeli radicalism to the detriment of traditional Christian churches.

Keywords: *Israel, Jerusalem, traditional Christianity, Cow’s Garden, religious radicalism, anti-Christian policy, Christian Zionism, property disputes.*

At the end of August, the high-profile story surrounding the “Cow’s Garden” plot in the Armenian Quarter of Old Jerusalem resurfaced. The Armenian community of Jerusalem, the “Save the Quarter Movement”, and several socio-political organizations issued a statement accusing the Armenian Patriarchate of Jerusalem of secretly concluding a second deal with the company *Xana Gardens* to lease the said land plot for a term of 99 years².

The first contract was signed back in July 2021, but protests from the local Armenian community, supported by the Palestinian Authority and the government of Jordan, prevented the deal from going through³. A process of administrative and legal proceedings was initiated, alongside which public initiatives were launched to protect the plot, organize round-the-clock volunteer security patrols, and promote the position of Armenian organizations on this issue.

Tensions peaked in 2023, when Armenian defenders of the “Cow’s Garden” were forced to confront attacks by local Jewish ultra-radicals and the police, who were acting in the interests of the Australian company *Xana Gardens* and its Jewish-born owner, Danny Rubenstein.

The public movement to protect the “Cow’s Garden” also put pressure on the Jerusalem Patriarchate, calling on Holy Etchmiadzin to influence Patriarch Nourhan Manougian. As a result, in May 2023, the Synod of the Holy Brotherhood of St. Jacob⁴ in Jerusalem was forced to declare the deal illegal. Responsibility for it was placed on Archimandrite Baret Yeretzian, who was in charge of the Patriarchate’s property management. According to the Patriarchate, he acted on his own initiative and misled Patriarch Nourhan. Yeretzian was defrocked⁵, after which the tensions between the community and the Patriarchate temporarily subsided.

¹ The original (in Rus.) was posted on our website on 12.09.2025.

² “The Cow Garden” is not for sale: Armenian organizations in Jerusalem warn the Patriarchate. Voice of Armenia, August 27, 2025 <https://bit.ly/4mUp9k> (download date: 05.09.2025).

³ “The Armenian Patriarchate leased Jerusalem land”. Vestnik Kavkaza (in Rus.), 29.09.2021, <https://vestnikavkaza.ru/analytics/armanskij-patriarhat-sdal-ierusalimskuu-zemlu-v-arendu.html> (download date: 05.09.2025).

⁴ The Synod of the Holy Brotherhood of Jacob (or the Holy Brotherhood of Jacob) is the highest governing body of the Jerusalem Patriarchate of the Armenian Apostolic Church (AAC).

⁵ “A cleric who leased lands in the Armenian quarter of Jerusalem was defrocked”. The Armenian Museum of Moscow and the Culture of Nations <https://www.armmuseum.ru/news-blog/2023/5/10/the-priest-who-leased-the-land-of-the-armenian-quarter-in-jerusalem-was-put-to-death> (download date: 05.09.2025).

Meanwhile, the concern expressed recently by the “Save the Quarter Movement” indicates that some negotiations with representatives of the Israeli government and *Xana Gardens* are still underway. The Jerusalem Patriarchate essentially confirmed this information, stating that it is not hiding any “secrets” and that “*the process is being conducted strictly within the law*”⁶. It is obvious that *Xana Gardens*, which enjoys the full support of the Israeli government, is consistently pushing the deal through, likely having agreed only to some purely formal concessions on its part or offered more favorable financial terms for the Jerusalem Patriarchate.

The ability of Armenian community activists in Jerusalem to continue resisting the pressure from the Israeli authorities is limited. In addition to the contradictions between local Armenian socio-political organizations and the Patriarchate, the community’s ability to defend the “Cow’s Garden” is also negatively affected by the crisis in the life of the Armenian Apostolic Church, related to the conflict with the political authorities in the Republic of Armenia, and, in fact, the passive position of official Yerevan on this issue, which apparently does not want to “provoke” Tel Aviv. It should also be noted that the Palestinian Authority has lost its role in East Jerusalem, which, against the backdrop of recent events in Gaza and the West Bank, has practically lost the mechanisms for constructive communication with the government of B. Netanyahu. The “Cow’s Garden” is in the area of responsibility of the Palestinian Authority of Jerusalem, but Netanyahu’s far-right cabinet, under the pretext of the narrative about the terrorist nature of all national Palestinian structures, including completely legal ones, is not inclined to dialogue with them, let alone compromise on any issue.

It might seem that the disputes over the real estate of the Armenian community are a consequence of the Israeli authorities’ negative attitude specifically towards the Armenian denomination, which is only one of the custodians of the Christian heritage of Jerusalem. It could also be assumed that Tel Aviv’s unlawful pressure on the Armenian Patriarchate of Jerusalem is due, among other things, to the relatively weak international political protection of the Armenian Apostolic Church, in contrast to which other significant denominations in the Holy Land enjoy the support of the Vatican and the Greek Orthodox world, which excludes property raiding. Perhaps these narratives were not without foundation in the recent past, but Tel Aviv’s recent steps, now against the Greek Orthodox confession of Jerusalem, indicate that the pressure on the Armenians should be viewed in the broader context of its policy.

Thus, on August 6, 2025, Israel froze all the accounts of the Patriarchate of the Greek Orthodox Church in Jerusalem, forcing Patriarch Theophilos III to pay taxes on church property that is “*not used for religious purposes*”. However, at the end of August, under strong diplomatic pressure from the consuls general of several countries, the Jerusalem municipality backed down from this radical measure, allowing the Patriarchate to pay salaries to church employees, teachers, and service personnel of the Orthodox congregation⁷. However, the problem was not resolved.

Disputes and tense negotiations over financial deductions from the commercial exploitation of Christian real estate in Jerusalem have been ongoing since 2018, when an administrative act was passed in the city abolishing the special status of Christian properties.

⁶ “The Jerusalem Patriarchate of the Armenian Apostolic Church denies reports of a secret deal over the “Cow’s Garden”. Voice of Armenia, 21.09.2025, <https://bit.ly/4gblghS> (download date: 05.09.2025).

⁷ “Greek Orthodox Patriarchate bank accounts in Jerusalem reportedly unfrozen”. Orthodox Christianity, 29.08.2025, <https://orthochristian.com/172211.html> (download date: 06.09.2025).

The Christian churches and communities of Jerusalem on one side and the municipality on the other have been unable to reach a consensus on this issue for more than 6 years, and there is every reason to believe that the conflict will continue in the foreseeable future. This is indicated by the Israeli authorities' unwillingness at the institutional level to ensure the viability of Christian communities in accordance with the obligations undertaken by the Jewish state in the early years of its formation.

The Christian communities of Israel and Palestine have long been signaling that the disagreements over church property are not the result of administrative and legal collisions at the municipal level but are one of the manifestations of Tel Aviv's consistent political course aimed at minimizing Christian influence in the country. Israeli Christians have traditionally been subjected to pressure from ultra-radical circles of Jewish society against the backdrop of the state's passive position in restraining chauvinistic sentiments and religious intolerance in the Jewish environment. However, since the last, third prime ministerial term of B. Netanyahu (2022), which became possible as a result of the formation of a coalition of the "Likud" party with ultra-radical factions in the Knesset, Tel Aviv's anti-Christian policy has become even more pronounced.

By 2023, the persecution of Christians had become systematic, which revealed the authorities' desire to institutionalize this process at both the public and political-administrative levels. Representatives of the Christian confessions of Jerusalem openly began to say that B. Netanyahu personally contributes to the political persecution of Christians and condones ultra-radicals in the physical attacks on clergymen and the desecration of Christian shrines. All this gave the Vatican-appointed Latin Patriarch of Jerusalem, Pierbattista Pizzaballa, reason to state that "*the political thesis of freedom of religion in Israel is greatly compromised*"⁸.

The Israeli government could probably have, in its characteristic manner, harshly condemned the Patriarch and other Christian leaders of Jerusalem for slander and even anti-Semitism, if, a month before Pizzaballa's interview with the Associated Press, B. Netanyahu's associates had not brought the anti-Christian hysteria to a climax by officially announcing the need to ban the use of the name of Jesus Christ in the country. In the spring of 2023, deputies from the ultra-Orthodox party "United Torah Judaism", which is in a coalition with "Likud", Moshe Gafni and Ya'akov Asher, introduced a bill in the Knesset to ban in Israel "*the mention of the name of Christ as God*", "*the dissemination of Christian ideology*", and "*talks about the Christian faith*"⁹. A prison sentence of up to three years was provided for violating the law. Against this backdrop, any attempt by B. Netanyahu accusing the Christian leaders of Israel of bias and an ungrateful attitude towards the "*democratic Jewish state*" would have looked absurd. And yet, even this scandalous initiative of his political associates did not force the Israeli prime minister to take a step towards defusing the tense situation. In the context of the fate of the aforementioned bill, he limited himself to a statement that he would not advance any laws against the Christian community.

⁸ "Netanyahu's Radical Government is Oppressing Christians in Israel – The Associated Press". Octagon MediaA (in Rus.), 13.04.2025, https://octagon.media/novosti/radikalnoe_pravitelstvo_netanyaxu_pritesnyaet_xristian_v_izraile_the_associated_press.html (download date: 06.09.2025).

⁹ "Israel has developed a bill banning the mention of the name of Jesus Christ". SPZH (in Rus.), 26.03.2023, <https://spzh.eu/ru/news/72652-v-izrale-razrabotali-zakonoproekt-zapreshchajushchij-upominat-imja-iisusa-khrista> (download date: 06.09.2025).

Meanwhile, Israeli Christians have less and less reason to believe in the weakening of the policy of intolerance and xenophobia in the country under B. Netanyahu. Community and spiritual leaders are aware that, in essence, the raiding of their lands, tax pressure, and regular attacks by Jewish ultra-radicals on representatives of Christian minorities can prepare the ground for large-scale pogroms in the future. The Christians of Israel no longer have any illusions, clearly realizing that the traditionally pragmatic policy of the Jewish state is now significantly transformed by mystical Talmudic teachings that categorically reject any models of religious coexistence and tolerance in the country. This is rejected by many Israeli citizens who profess traditional Judaism, who believe that B. Netanyahu and his entourage have fallen under the ideological influence of ultra-Orthodox Jewish sects that have infiltrated the structures of power, and that in state policy they are now guided not by rationalism, but by doctrines based on the idea of the exclusivity of the world Jewry. According to Israeli moderate political factions and the electorate that supports them, this is a path to nowhere, reflecting the national-chauvinism of colonial powers, but in even more monstrous forms¹⁰. As proof, the situation in Gaza is cited, where the declared anti-terrorist operation has taken on the character of a massacre of an entire people, where the only markers are the ethnic identity and Islamic faith of the Palestinians.

It was assumed that after the HAMAS terrorist attack on Israel on October 7, 2023, Tel Aviv, preparing for a fierce struggle with Palestinian extremism, would find it advantageous to defuse the tense relations with Christian denominations and communities in recent years, especially against the backdrop of how the Christian countries of the West fully expressed their support for Israel's "*righteous anger*" and extended a helping hand to it. However, the "*anti-terrorist campaign*" in its essence exceeded all the boundaries of cruelty permissible in the Christian tradition, which was unthinkable even in the dark era of the medieval crusades against Muslims.

The Christian world did not accept the deaths of over 60,000 civilians in Gaza and the deliberate destruction of about 1,000 mosques. Even greater indignation in the West was caused by the fact that Israel destroyed Christian churches on Palestinian territory¹¹ and in Lebanon, presented as a necessary military measure or a technical error. To no lesser extent, the Christian world was affected by the manifestations of the fact that Tel Aviv, in the period under review, practically did not deviate from its policy of redistributing the property of the Jerusalem denominations and condoning the ongoing attacks by Jewish ultra-radicals. Thus, the war with "*Islamic extremism*" in Gaza not only did not push Israel towards a paradigm of solidarity with another "*Abrahamic religion*" – Christianity, but also contributed, not without the participation of the authorities, to the generation of anti-Christian extremism in the country, which is trying to justify its actions with mystical prejudices.

It is noteworthy that religious intolerance in Israel is manifested precisely in relation to the traditional Christian confessions widely represented in the Holy Land – Catholicism, Orthodoxy, the Armenian Autocephaly, and a number of Eastern Churches. At the same time,

¹⁰ "Why Do So Many Jews Condemn Israel's War in Gaza?". Russia in Global Affairs (in Rus.), 23.11.2023, <https://globalaffairs.ru/articles/pochemu-evreei-osuzhdayut/> (download date: 06.09.2025).

¹¹ "Palestinian authorities have announced the destruction of more than a thousand mosques in the Gaza Strip". RIA NOVOSTI (in Rus.), 21.08.2025, <https://ria.ru/20250821/izrail-2036639432.html> (download date: 06.09.2025).

Evangelical churches, which do not have similar representation in the region and only to a small extent intersect with the interests of radical Jewish doctrines, enjoy a relatively tolerant attitude. In turn, Evangelicals, who are predominantly concentrated in Northern Europe and the United States, have until recently demonstrated a marked loyalty to Israel and its policies.

It was on the basis of evangelical theology, which gave rise to dozens of American churches, that the so-called doctrine of “*Christian Zionism*” was formed in the United States in the 1970s, which over time turned into a political movement. According to the worldview of “*Christian Zionists*”, the United States should, by its actions, bring about the fulfillment of the prophecy of “*Armageddon*”, which will be followed by the Second Coming of Christ. In this context, the support provided to Israel is not just a political choice, but a religious duty, predetermined by Biblical prophecies.

Aggressive actions in support of Israel, up to and including participation in a war on its side, are, in the understanding of “*Christian Zionists*”, a good thing that brings about the fulfillment of Biblical prophecies about the end of times¹². The influence of “*Christian Zionists*” on the U.S. political establishment, which, of course, was in every way supported by Jewish lobbyists, has only grown over the years. Their positions were especially strong among Republicans, and in the first and second terms of Donald Trump’s presidency, they already held key positions in the White House administration. The current American president himself, who does not give any reason in his rhetoric to consider him a bearer of religious beliefs and often criticizes Israel¹³, nevertheless, in practical terms, builds U.S. policy towards Israel in full accordance with the aggressive doctrine of “*Christian Zionists*”. This, in turn, is in complete harmony with and complements Israeli radicalism in the region, the victim of which, however, paradoxically turns out to be not only the Islamic factor, but also the interests of traditional Christian churches. In this matter, “*Christian Zionists*” are not inclined to sacrifice the imperative goals of their doctrine for the sake of preserving the positions of traditional churches, ecumenical solidarity, and mutual assistance.

This state of affairs is also affected by the historical rivalry of Evangelical teachings, from the depths of which “*Christian Zionism*” arose, with the Catholic, Greek Orthodox, Armenian, and other traditional confessions. For Evangelicals, the struggle of Jerusalem confessions for their historical right to be present in the Holy Land, as well as for the preservation of a centuries-old heritage, including temples, sanctuaries, schools, and lands, is nothing more than the defense of property, material goods, and financial income. In turn, they view Israel’s actions as a mission of a higher, “*divine*” order, and, therefore, the “*private interests*” and “*mercantilism*” of the traditional churches, “*which ignore the revelations of Biblical prophecies*”, can be sacrificed to it.

Thus, in the context of recent events in the Holy Land, “*Christian Zionists*” have found themselves in the same camp with chauvinists and followers of radical Jewish sects. The

¹² “Christian Zionism, Armageddon, and the Antichrist as the Foundations of Trump’s Middle East Policy”. Strategic Culture Foundation (Rus.), 16.03.2025, <https://www.fondsk.ru/news/2025/03/16/hristianskiy-sionizm-armageddon-antikhris-kak-osnovy-blizhnevostochnoy-politiki> (download date: 07.09.2025).

¹³ Bard M., “Is Trump a Zionist?”. STMEGI (in Rus.), 17.11.2024, <https://stmegi.com/opinions/posts/122482/sionist-li-tramp/> (download date: 07.09.2025).

resulting political-ideological symbiosis is forming a new reality in the region, making geopolitical and geoeconomic processes dependent on biased interpretations of sacred texts.

At the same time, recently there have been trends of weakening of the electoral base of the proponents of such initiatives both in Israel and in the United States. In the Jewish state, the adherents of moderate Judaism are increasingly advocating for religious pluralism and the establishment of peace with Palestine and the Islamic world as a whole. In particular, they emphasize their loyalty to the Christian factor, which has historically earned a multifaceted presence in the Holy Land. In turn, in the United States, the policy of “*Christian Zionists*” in support of the far-right government of B. Netanyahu is beginning to experience a deficit of trust from deep and traditional Evangelical America. American Christians, who are mostly represented by dozens of Evangelical churches, are increasingly seeing contradictions to the universal values of Christian morality in the actions of the authorities.

A sociological survey conducted in the U.S. back in the spring of 2018 by *Gallup* agency showed that Washington’s support for Israel enjoyed the unconditional approval of the vast majority of ordinary American citizens¹⁴. However, already in May 2024, surveys conducted by the companies *Langer Research Associates* and *Ipsos* revealed a dynamic of a noticeable decrease in the number of supporters of American support for the Jewish state¹⁵. Finally, in the summer of 2025, the same *Gallup* recorded a record drop in the number of respondents who sympathize with Israel, respectively, showing a twofold increase in the number of respondents who condemn Washington’s aid to Tel Aviv¹⁶.

Thus, Christian America, following Europe, is showing signs of moving away from the adherents of “*Christian Zionism*” and occult doctrines that have penetrated the authorities in the U.S. and Israel and advocate for the “*man-made acceleration*” of the timing of the Biblical prophecies. In this regard, the question arises: will the current chaos in the Holy Land lead to the active consolidation of the Christian world around the cornerstone values and Biblical covenants of peace, or will the Churches prefer to stand aside, allowing fanatics to continue to manipulate the prophecies of the end of times.

¹⁴ “Poll: Public Support for Israel in the U.S. at a Record High”. Lechaim.ru (in Rus.), 15.03.2018, <https://lechaim.ru/news/opros-obshhestvennaya-podderzhka-izrailya-v-ssha-na-rekordno-vysokom-urovne/> (download date: 07.09.2025).

¹⁵ “A survey showed what Americans think about aiding Israel”. RIA NOVOSTI (in Rus.), 03.05.2024, <https://ria.ru/20240503/opros-1943716231.html> (download date: 07.09.2025).

¹⁶ “New poll shows a drop of support in U.S. for Israel’s war in the Gaza Strip”. EDNEWS (in Rus.), 30.07.2025, <https://ednews.net/ru/news/world/689607-noviy-opros-pokazivaet-padenie-obshestvennoy> (download date: 07.09.2025).