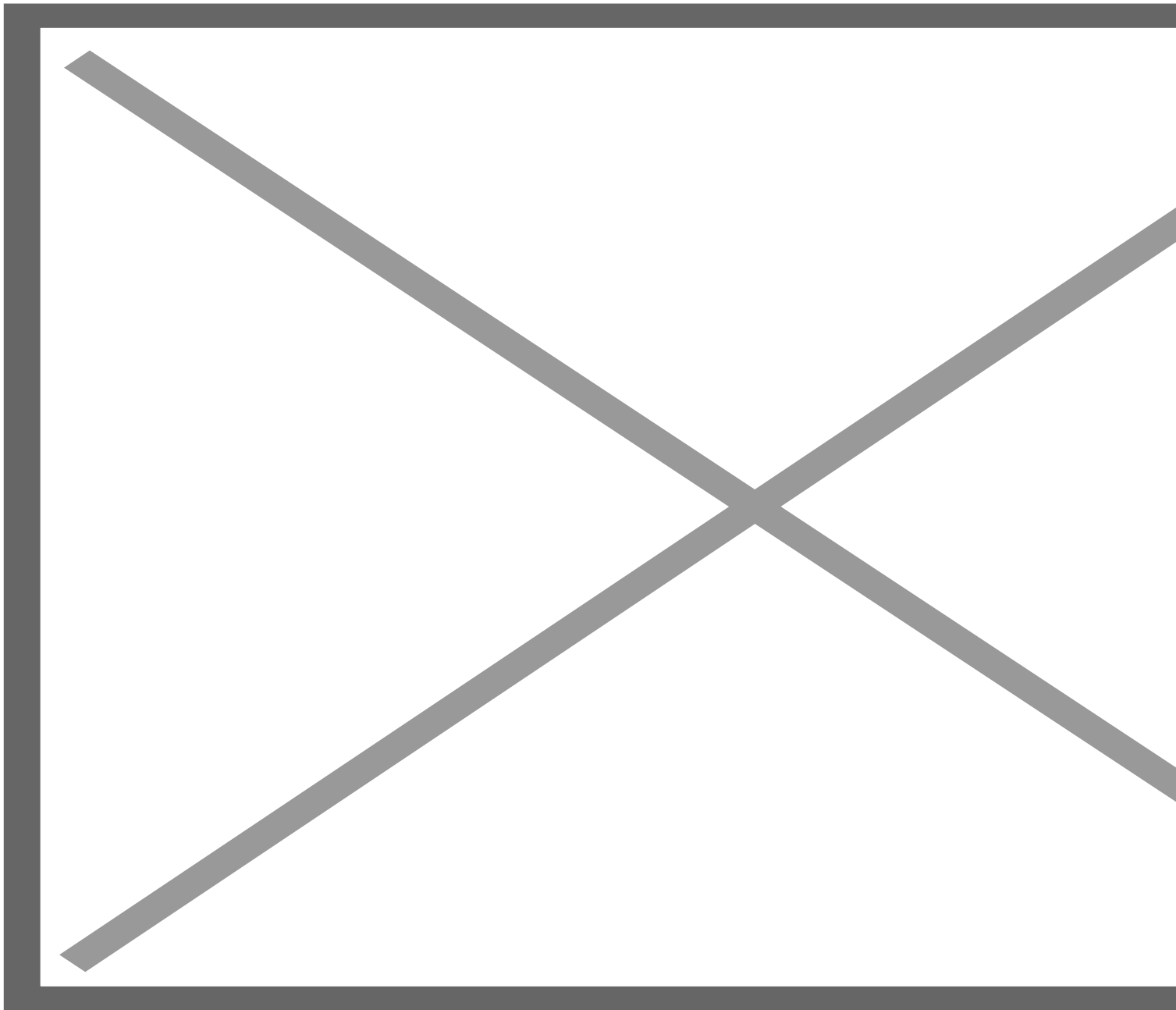


Church leaders decry closing of Church of the Holy Sepulchre

by [World Council of Churches](#)

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The Church of the Holy Sepulchre in Jerusalem (Photo: Albin Hillert/WCC)

For the first time in centuries, on March 29, Catholics in Jerusalem were prevented from celebrating the Palm Sunday mass at the Church of the Holy Sepulchre. Israeli Police prevented Pierbattista Pizzaballa, head of the Catholic Church in the Holy Land, and Francesco Ielpo, the official guardian of the Church of the Holy Sepulchre, from entering the church as they made their way to celebrate mass.

“The two were stopped en route, while proceeding privately and without any characteristics of a procession or ceremonial act, and were compelled to turn back,” said a statement from the Latin Patriarchate of Jerusalem and the Custody Of the Holy Land.

The statement described the incident as “a grave precedent,” one that disregards “the sensibilities of billions of people around the world who, during this week, look to Jerusalem.”

The church has been closed to parishioners and pilgrims since the start of the US-Israeli war with Iran, though clergy have continued services inside. Preventing the entry of the Pizzaballa and Ielpo “constitutes a manifestly unreasonable and grossly disproportionate measure,” reads the statement.

“This hasty and fundamentally flawed decision, tainted by improper considerations, represents an extreme departure from basic principles of reasonableness, freedom of worship, and respect,” for the Status Quo, the centuries-old pact that regulates management of the church.

The complete closure of the Church of the Holy Sepulchre comes as religious sites have been increasingly blocked in Jerusalem. Amid the hostilities with Iran, Jerusalem’s Old City has become increasingly vulnerable to actions that might damage the city’s unique religious and historical sites. On March 16, for instance, missile shrapnel landed on the rooftop of the Holy Sepulchre Church.

But, according to the Status Quo, whether or not the Holy Sepulchre remains open is in the hands of religious authorities, not the police.

Patriarch Theophilos of Jerusalem, head of the Orthodox Church in Jerusalem, and the heads of churches in Jerusalem convened an emergency session urging Israeli authorities to fully reopen the Holy Sepulchre for Holy Week and Paschal celebrations.

The Council of Heads of Churches, meeting under Theophilos, sent a letter to Israeli prime minister Benjamin Netanyahu and foreign minister Gideon Saar after reports suggested only 50 people would be allowed inside for the Holy Fire ceremony on Holy Saturday. Church officials, including the Brotherhood of the Holy Sepulchre, voiced serious concerns over the restrictions.

The Western Wall is closed also, but it is not governed by the Status Quo. —World Council of Churches