

# Israel keeps Greek patriarch on hold: Reported ties with Arafat

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In response to a series of legal challenges, Israel's Supreme Court has frozen the appointment of the Greek patriarch of the Holy Land, Irineos I, whose position was to have been approved by Israel early this month. The February 25 decision was the latest action aimed at preventing the patriarch from being confirmed in his status more than two years after he was elected.

The Israeli cabinet finally gave its approval to his appointment in January, but this decision was temporarily suspended in response to court actions. Under a tradition dating back centuries, a new Greek patriarch in Jerusalem has to be confirmed by the rulers of the Holy Land, in this case Israel, the Palestinian Authority and Jordan.

The Greek Orthodox archbishop in Jerusalem, Aristarchos, told ENI on March 2 that the church is optimistic that the legal challenges will be defeated. "We are hopeful and we are waiting for this to end and for the patriarch to receive the official documents recognizing his status," he said.

One of the challenges is from an unnamed Greek Orthodox church leader from the Galilee region and the other is from an Israeli attorney, Dan Avi-Yitzchak, on behalf of an unnamed client. In his petition, Avi-Yitzchak repeated the claims of Israel's secret police alleging that the patriarch is pro-Palestinian and his elevation is against the interests of the Jewish state.

The Greek-born patriarch was elected by a synod of bishops in August 2001 but was not initially accepted by Israel because of his reported warm ties with Palestinian leader Yasir Arafat. Israel also suspected Irineos might use his position to prevent the renewal of leases to Israelis on the large land holdings of the Greek Orthodox Church.

As head of the Greek Orthodox Church, considered the most wealthy such institution in Israel, Irineos would be responsible for its extensive property holdings, including the land on which the Knesset (the Israeli parliament) now stands, as well as the

prime minister's and the president's official residences, all in Jerusalem. -*Ecumenical News International*