



## **His Holiness Patriarch Kirill meets with President of the Palestinian National Administration Mahmoud Abbas**

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On 21 January 2012, His Holiness Patriarch Kirill of Moscow and All Russia met with the President of the Palestinian National Authority (PNA), Mahmoud Abbas.

Attending the meeting, which took place at the Patriarchal residence in St. Daniel's Monastery, were Metropolitan Hilarion of Volokolamsk, chairman of the Moscow Patriarchate's Department for External Church Relations (DECR); Bishop Sergiy of Solnechnogorsk, head of the Moscow Patriarchate's Administrative Secretariat; archpriest Nikolai Balashov, DECR deputy chairman; archpriest Igor Yakimchuk, DECR secretary for inter-Orthodox relations; archpriest Sergiy Zvonarev, DECR secretary for far abroad countries; Rev. Oleg Yanshin, a staff member of the Moscow Patriarchate's Management for Institutions Abroad; and Prof. Valery Alexeyev, president of the International Foundation for the Unity of Orthodox Christian Nations (IFUOCN).

The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation was represented by deputy minister Mikhail Bogdanov and by A. Rudakov, representative of Russia to the PNA.

Accompanying Mr. Mahmoud Abbas were H. E. Dr. Faed Mustafa, Ambassador Extraordinary and Plenipotentiary of the State of Palestine to the Russian Federation; Azzam Alahmad, member of the Central Committee of the Fatah movement; Nabil Aburudaina, the President's official representative; Akram Hanieh, the President's advisor; Majdi Khaldi, the President's Advisor for Diplomatic Relations; Ziad Albandak, the President's Advisor for Christian Relations; and Khodr Az-Zufairi, the President's special advisor.

The Primate of the Russian Orthodox Church congratulated Mahmoud Abbas with the IFUOCN prize and called the awarding a symbolic event. He said: "Though you are not an Orthodox, we wanted to show our respect for your actions directed at preserving the holy sites and keeping up religious life in the Holy Land, including that of Orthodox Christians, as well as for your special contribution to the development of relations between people of Palestine and Russia."

While talking about the situation in the Middle East countries, His Holiness said that interreligious balance is being upset and interreligious peace is being violated there, mentioned egregious cases of the persecution against Christians in certain countries, and appraised religious peace in the land of Palestine promoted through the efforts of the President of the Palestinian National Authority.

"By this prize, we wanted to emphasize your personal contribution into the interreligious peace in Palestine," the Primate of the Russian Orthodox Church told Mahmoud Abbas and congratulated him and the people of Palestine on the important steps taken towards recognition of the State of Palestine by world community. "Palestinian membership in UNESCO is an impressive sign of further improvement in the situation. I am deeply convinced that the State of Palestine can bring its reconciling and constructive

contribution to the establishment of interreligious peace in those Middle East countries, in which it is frustrated at present,” His Holiness said.

He noted with satisfaction the development of pilgrimage from the countries with the Russian Orthodox Church’s presence to the Holy Land and mentioned the relations between the State of Palestine and the Russian Orthodox Church and between Palestine and Russia as a principal factor in this development. Brotherly relations between the Moscow Patriarchate and the Patriarchate of Jerusalem, to which jurisdiction Orthodox Christians of the Holy Land belong, were noted. “We believe that the development of pilgrimage serves to the development of relations between the two sister Churches. The Russian Ecclesiastical Mission was established in the Holy Land in 1847. Some metochia are now in the territory of the State of Palestine. Restoration and decoration of these places so important to us is under way, and I wholeheartedly thank you for support you are rendering to the Russian Orthodox Church,” the Primate of the Russian Church said.

Mahmoud Abbas underscored the importance of his meeting with His Holiness, saying that all people of Palestine, who belong to different religious groups, including Orthodox Christians, respect Patriarch Kirill. As to the prize, Mahmoud Abbas said that it was a privilege to him and all people of Palestine. He expressed his hope for increasing the number of pilgrims to Palestine, especially from the Russian Orthodox Church. “By now the number of pilgrims has reached 250 thousand a year, and we want it to grow to one million next year. The Holy Land is dear to all people who profess the three major religions, which call heavenly religions: Christianity, Judaism and Islam. Peace is necessary to this country so that all could come to this land and venerate holy sites.”

The head of the State of Palestine certified the fact of good relations of Palestine with the Russian state and Russian people and with the Russian Orthodox Church. He said that the Imperial Orthodox Palestine Society would celebrate its 130th anniversary this year and added that its establishment and activity speak of the foresight of those who founded it.

Mahmoud Abbas said that he had handed a letter to the Primate of the Russian Orthodox Church written by the Palestinians twenty-four years ago about the Russian property in the territory of Palestine. “Even before the beginning of our negotiations with Israel, we tried to find out and verify what had belonged to the Russian Orthodox Church in the territory of Palestine, as we consider it very important to return everything. Our courts are trying one or two cases. I am confident that they will rule in favour of the Russian Orthodox Church,” he added.

Mahmoud Abbas spoke about the interreligious peace in the Middle East. “The acts against Churches in Egypt and Iraq have pained our hearts and we strongly condemned them,” he said and added that it was necessary to maintain national unity so that religious groups that have lived in the territory for a thousand years could coexist in peace and harmony.

“Relations with all Christian Churches are very important to us,” the Palestinian leader said. He mentioned friendly relations with Patriarch Shenouda III of the Coptic Church, the Pope’s visit to Bethlehem two years ago, and recent meetings with the representatives of religious communities in London.

The head of the Palestinian National Authority is confident that Palestine should be a land of peace and harmony, as it is the Holy Land for the three world religions, the followers of which should come to Palestine and feel this peace and harmony.

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