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'Peres wants to yield sites to Vatican'

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President Shimon Peres is willing to hand over Israeli sovereignty of key Christian holy sites to the Vatican, a proposition that is reportedly opposed by Interior Minister Eli Yishai and that has ruffled feathers among other senior government officials, Army Radio reported on Monday.

Beit Hanassi could not be reached for comment on Monday, as it does not issue statements to the press while the president is abroad.

According to the radio report, the president is exerting pressure on the government to give up sovereignty over six sites, including the Church of the Annunciation in Nazareth, the Coenaculum on Mount Zion, Gethsemane on the Mount of Olives in Jerusalem, and the Church of the Multiplication on the Kinneret.

The report quoted Beit Hanassi as saying that talks had been going on long enough, and that the time had come to compromise with the Vatican and come to an agreement.

On Sunday, according to the report, Beit Hanassi requested that the Interior Ministry sign documents ceding sovereignty. However, Yishai refused.

"Every concession like this limits the Israeli government's ability to function as a sovereign government in the area," the interior minister was quoted as saying.

Referring to Pope Benedict XVI's upcoming visit to the region on May 11-15, Yishai said, "I'm certain that the aim of the pope's visit is not to cause damage and not to gain sovereignty."

Relinquishing sovereignty over the sites would mean they would legally belong to Vatican City, and that any Israeli request to pave roads or lay water, sewage or electrical infrastructure would have to be approved by the Vatican.

But Rabbi David Rosen, chairman of the International Jewish Committee for Inter-religious Consultations (IJCIC), who spoke about the pope's upcoming visit during a press conference at The Israel Project's office in Jerusalem on Monday, said this was not the first time the topic had been broached, and that he believed one of the main sticking points was over the Coenaculum.

"This is a site that has been identified as a Muslim holy site as well," Rosen said. "And while the Vatican wants it to be recognized as a Christian holy site, it could be viewed as an Israeli move to take the site away from the Muslims and give it to the Christians. Furthermore, once you change the status quo [regarding holy sites], it can come back to haunt you."

As such, Rosen explained that while the issue might come up again while the pope was here, the proposal, and especially the idea of ceding control over the Coenaculum, would likely not be approved.

"Every time [this issue] comes up, it gets rejected," he said. "But the pope recognizes Israel's sovereignty over holy sites, and the Vatican has no theological problem with Jewish sovereignty over Jerusalem."

Still, others in the government said they weren't opposed to the idea out of hand, and questioned the possible benefits the transfer of sovereignty could bring to the economy.

"If we were sure that this present to the Christian world would bring millions of Christian pilgrims here, then we would have a good reason to think about it," Tourism Minister Stas Meseznikov was quoted as saying in the report. "But since we're not sure that it will happen, why should we give out gifts?"

Former Meretz chairman Yossi Beilin, however, was quoted as saying that Israel had not behaved satisfactorily in recent dealings with the Vatican.

"We need to compromise with them," he said.

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