ISRAEL'S 20 MOST PROMINENT ACADEMICS & INTELLECTUALS ISSUE URGENT STATEMENT IN SUPPORT OF ARMENIAN QUARTER OF JERUSALEM, REJECT COWS' GARDEN DEAL

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Category: Opinions

In an unprecedented act of solidarity, 20 of Israel's most prominent academics, jurists, and cultural figures have issued a public statement condemning recent developments in Jerusalem's Armenian Quarter and expressing full support for the Armenian community's struggle to defend its heritage and presence in the Holy City.

The statement, titled "For the Protection of the Armenian Quarter and the Defense of the Rights of the Armenian Community in Jerusalem," was published on September 24, 2025, and disseminated by Jerusalemite-Armenian journalist and activist Kegham Balian. The declaration comes amid ongoing tensions surrounding the controversial Xana Gardens land deal and recent efforts to reach a compromise over the so-called Cows' Garden, an area historically belonging to the Armenian Patriarchate.

"Alarming Developments" Prompt Outcry

"We, the undersigned… feel a moral and civic duty to raise a clear and unequivocal voice in light of the alarming developments concerning the future of the Armenian Quarter in Jerusalem," the statement opens, citing mounting concerns over decisions made without the participation or consent of the Armenian community, both locally and in the diaspora.

The controversy centers around a 2021 lease agreement between the Armenian Patriarchate of Jerusalem and Xana Gardens, a private development company, which granted the firm exclusive 98-year rights over the Cows' Garden — the last remaining open parcel of land in the Old City's Armenian Quarter. The deal was signed without community consultation and has sparked widespread opposition from Armenians in Jerusalem and worldwide.

Describing the land as a historic communal space and a vital resource for potential development, the signatories warn that turning the Cows' Garden into a commercial parking lot represents an existential threat to one of Jerusalem's oldest Christian communities.

A Voice Against Secrecy and Coercion

The Israeli signatories criticize the absence of transparency in the original agreement and caution against the compromise deal currently being negotiated between the Patriarchate and Xana Gardens, calling it "a threat to the future of the Armenian Quarter as a whole."

They further express alarm over violent assaults, threats, and false accusations of anti-Semitism directed at the Armenian community since the issue gained public attention. The statement condemns such rhetoric, calling it "baseless" and emphasizing the community's nearly 1,500-year-long peaceful and respectful presence in Jerusalem, including with its Jewish and Israeli neighbors.

Key Demands from Israeli Signatories

The 20 Israeli public figures call on government authorities and their international partners to act "responsibly, transparently, and in the spirit of justice" to ensure that Jerusalem remains a city of coexistence and dignity. Their statement includes four specific calls:

- **Recognition of the Armenian endowment's rights** as communal, religious, and historical property that must not be exploited commercially without broad community consent.
- **Preservation of the Armenian Quarter** as an integral and inseparable part of Jerusalem's mosaic and world heritage.
- **Immediate rejection of violence, threats, and incitement** against the Armenian community.
- **Protection from hate speech and demonization**, while encouraging respectful coexistence and neighborly relations.

A Historic Statement Amid a Historic Struggle

This show of public support from leading voices in Israeli academia and civil society marks a significant moment in the ongoing crisis over Armenian property and presence in Jerusalem.

Among the 20 signatories are two deputy mayors of Jerusalem, numerous professors from Hebrew University, architects, political scientists, archaeologists, human rights activists, and even a former Knesset member and government minister.

Their message is clear: the Armenian Quarter is not only an Armenian concern, but a shared moral and cultural responsibility for all residents of Jerusalem, and for those committed to justice and coexistence in the region.

Full List of Signatories (In order of appearance):

- **Prof. Itzhak Galnoor** – Former Civil Service Commissioner, Hebrew University of Jerusalem
- **Dr. Laura Wharton** – Member of the Jerusalem City Council
- **Adv. Yossi Havilio** – Deputy Mayor of Jerusalem
- **Mr. Yoav Loeff** – Hebrew University, Armenian Studies
- **Mr. Yonathan Mizrachi** – Archaeologist, founder of Emek Shaveh
- **Mr. Giora Solar** – Architect, conservation consultant, Israel Archaeological Institute
- **Prof. Michael Stone** – Hebrew University, Armenian Studies
- **Prof. Reuven Amitai** – Hebrew University, Islamic and Middle Eastern Studies
- **Dr. Yakir Paz** – Hebrew University, Classical Studies and Talmud
- **Dr. Eran Tzidkiyahu** – Hebrew University, Political Science
- **Prof. Arie Kacowicz** – Hebrew University, International Relations
- **Ms. Tzipi Ron** – Jerusalem activist in shared society issues
- **Prof. Julia Resnik** – Hebrew University, Education
- **Mr. Adir Schwarz** – Deputy Mayor of Jerusalem
- **Dr. Oded Steinberg** – Hebrew University, European and International Studies

- **Dr. Kfir Cohen-Kidron** – Van Leer Institute Research Fellow
- **Ms. Ziva Sternhell** – Architect
- **Mr. Nachman Shai** – Former Member of Knesset and Government Minister
- **Prof. Dana Shalev** – Hebrew University, Classical Studies
- **Dr. Hagai Agmon-Snir** – Founder, Jerusalem Intercultural Center

There are no comments yet.