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Letter dated 4 November 1980 from the Permanent Representative of Israel
to the United Nations addressed to the Secretary-General

I have the honour to refer to the letter of 29 October 1980 addressed to you by the Permanent Representative of Jordan ([A/35/578-S/14241](#)), to which he annexed, somewhat belatedly, a statement of 16 October by a Jordanian spokesman, regarding the small fire which occurred in the Church of the Holy Sepulchre in Jerusalem on 14 October 1980. In his letter, the Permanent Representative of Jordan went so far as to allege that that fire was a "criminal attempt to burn the Church of the Holy Sepulchre" which, to his mind, was the result of an "Israeli policy to destroy Christian and Islamic Holy Places".

The Permanent Representative of Jordan makes these wild and inflammatory charges without supplying a shred of supporting evidence - for good reason, since his accusations are groundless.

Given the fact that Jordan is a country which considers itself as being in a state of war with Israel, the letter in question can only be regarded as yet another attempt by its Permanent Representative to fan the flames of religious incitement for the purpose of political warfare against my country. This is by no means the first time that Jordan has acted in such a reckless and irresponsible manner (see, for example, my letters to you of 25 January 1980 ([A/35/77-S/13766](#)) and 12 February 1980 ([A/35/98-S/13793](#))).

The facts of the present case are as follows. On Tuesday, 14 October 1980, a devotional candle toppled onto the wooden floor in the Armenian Chapel of St. Helena within the Church of the Holy Sepulchre. The fire was extinguished quickly. Such damage as there was, was confined to an oil painting hanging nearby.

It should be pointed out that fires have occurred from time to time in the Church of the Holy Sepulchre, as indeed they are liable to occur in any place of worship where hundreds of candles are in use. In fact, on 14 October 1955 - when the Walled City of Jerusalem was under Jordanian occupation - a fire broke out in the Church of the Holy Sepulchre in circumstances almost identical to those surrounding the fire in the Church last month. A devotional candle was accidentally toppled and as a result a carpet and some clerical robes were burned, and part of the Church's fabric was damaged.

A few years earlier - also during the Jordanian occupation of the Walled City - the Church of the Holy Sepulchre was engulfed in a far more serious conflagration. On 23 November 1949, a major fire broke out in the dome of the Church and raged for over 24 hours. Through the intermediary of the United Nations, the Government of Israel offered to send fire-fighters to help extinguish the blaze, but that offer was rejected by Jordan. The entire roofing of the dome was destroyed and, at the time, the material damage to the Church was estimated at almost \$1 million, as reported in The New York Times of 26 November 1949.

Given Jordan's unenviable record of desecration of Holy Places in Jerusalem, it ill becomes a representative of that country to express an opinion in the matter at hand, let alone mendaciously manipulate the means and machinery of the United Nations in a relentless campaign of political warfare against Israel. With particular regard to the Church of the Holy Sepulchre under Jordanian occupation, a report of the Middle East correspondent of The Times of London, published on 14 July 1959, bears remembering:

"Especially in the Church of the Holy Sepulchre any sensitive visitor must be appalled by the maze of steel and wooden buttresses that alone

save the structure from collapse, and by the accompanying mantle of almost impenetrable gloom and dirt."

The Christian communities in Jerusalem made plans to restore the Church against background indications from the Government of Jordan that it would insist on a Muslim architect to direct the work. For that and other reasons the restoration of the Church was not completed before the reunification of the city of Jerusalem in 1967.

The condition of the Church has improved markedly since then. With the full co-operation of Israel, the Christian authorities responsible for the maintenance and administration of the Church have proceeded unimpeded with the restoration work, and major parts of it have been completed. The New York Times of 23 July 1973 reported that the façade of the Church was gradually emerging from the ugly scaffolding that had covered it for decades, and that a brighter, structurally safe interior now greets the thousands of tourists and pilgrims who visit it every day.

The French architect responsible for renovating the Armenian section of the Church called it "the most ambitious restoration of the Holy Sepulchre ??? since the time of the Crusaders". Any visitor or pilgrim to Jerusalem can see for himself the remarkable results of this major restoration and renovation project.

Hence the Jordanian letter will no doubt be seen and treated for what it is - yet another extraordinary example of how little compunction the representative of Jordan has about injecting religious hatred into the Arab-Israel conflict and about abusing religious sentiment for his own partisan purposes. In doing so, he displays a reckless disregard of the facts and possible consequences of his ill-considered statements.

I have the honour to request that this letter be circulated as an official document of the General Assembly, under agenda items 26 and 91, and of the Security Council.

(Signed) Yehuda Z. BLUM
Ambassador
Permanent Representative of Israel
to the United Nations