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**Arutz 7: Israel in Secret Pact with Vatican - posted by Trekker, on: 2012/6/12 19:30**

Inside Israel

**ISRAEL IN SECRET PACT WITH VATICAN**

Will Israel give the Church sovereignty over King David's Tomb? The sides are talking, but won't make their agreements public for now.

By Elad Benari

First Publish: 6/13/2012, 2:14 AM

**Visitors at King David's Tomb**

A special meeting was held at the Pope's palace on Tuesday, attended by delegations from the Israeli Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the Vatican. During the meeting, the sides discussed some of the unresolved issues between them.

At the conclusion of the meeting, which was led by Deputy Foreign Minister Danny Ayalon, the Foreign Ministry released a statement saying, "The talks took place in an open, balanced and constructive environment, during which significant progress was made towards an agreement."

There have been disagreements between the Vatican and Israel on several economic issues and on the status of the Church and priests in Israel. Among the economic issues for which a solution has yet to be found is the question of property tax of churches and land owned by the Church, especially around the Kinneret, the tax status of churches and more.

Another controversial issue between the two sides is the Vatican's request that Israel give it sovereignty over King David's Tomb in Jerusalem. The Catholic Church has claimed ownership of a room in the compound, in which it says the "Last Supper" occurred. Ayalon has promised in the past he would defend Israel's sovereignty there.

Bahij Mansour, director of the department for religious affairs in the Foreign Ministry who has been responsible for the talks with the Vatican for the past two years, confirmed in a conversation with Arutz Sheva on Tuesday that the two sides are nearing an agreement. He added, however, that for the time being the parties have agreed not to make public any information regarding the understandings reached.

Asked by Arutz Sheva whether the issue of King David's Tomb would be included in the agreement, the Foreign Ministry said that the issue will indeed be included but would not reveal exact details.

"The details do not matter at the moment, but the subject of the room of the Last Supper will be included in the agreements," the Foreign Ministry said.

Mansour told Arutz Sheva that both sides made gestures and concessions in order to reach an agreement.

"At this time there are almost no differences. There was great openness between the parties and we are ahead of signing an agreement," he said, adding that the sides will meet again in six months.

In a speech a in the Knesset a few weeks ago, Ayalon said that Israel does not intend to give up its sovereignty over King David's Tomb. His remarks came in response to a question by Shas MK Nissim Ze'ev, who said that the Foreign Ministry is holding talks over giving up its sovereignty. Ayalon, in turn, said this "never happened," but agreed to a request by Ze'ev to bring the issue up for discussion at one of the Knesset's committees.

Ze'ev told Arutz Sheva on Tuesday he knows for a fact that there are indeed negotiations over the Vatican's demand for sovereignty of King David's Tomb, despite the fact that historians and archaeologists have stated that without any doubt, there is no evidence to suggest that the compound was in place 2,000 years ago or even half that time, a fact that

nullifies the Church's claims.

Ze'ev said that he believes the Church would allow the State to nationalize some of the land it owns around the Kinneret in exchange for obtaining sovereignty of the compound in question. It is not known how accurate Ze'ev's claims are since, for the time being, both parties are being careful not to disclose any information regarding the agreement being worked out.

Tags: Vatican ,Danny Ayalon ,King David's Tomb ,Catholic Church