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LETTER DATED 25 AUGUST 1969 FROM THE PERMANENT REPRESENTATIVE
OF ISRAEL ADDRESSED TO THE PRESIDENT OF THE SECURITY COUNCIL

I have the honour to refer to the fire which took place on 21 August 1969 in the sacred Moslem shrine, the Al Aksa Mosque, in the Old City of Jerusalem. Through the prompt and effective efforts of Arab and Jewish fire brigades the fire was extinguished in time to preserve the main structure of the Mosque and its dome. The damage to the building was confined mainly to the roof and internal walls of the eastern wing, and the possible repairs and restoration could be carried out within a short time. Normal prayers in the Mosque were resumed the following day.

The Government of Israel immediately expressed its profound sorrow at this event, on behalf of all the citizens of Israel, regardless of their faith.

At the Government's request, the Chief Justice appointed an independent Commission of Enquiry, headed by a Supreme Court Judge, together with the Mayor of Nazareth, a Christian Arab, the District Court Judge of Nazareth, a Moslem Arab, and two University professors with scientific competence, to enquire into the causes of the fire. The Commission has already commenced its work. Its hearings will be held in public and its findings will be published as soon as possible.

It should be pointed out that the Mosque is controlled, administered and safeguarded solely by the Wakf, the appropriate Moslem religious authority. No change has taken place in that respect since this part of the city came under Israel control in 1967.

It is the declared policy and solemn undertaking of the Israel Government to leave the custody of the Holy Places in the hands of those faiths to whom they are sacred and to guarantee free access to them.

On the basis of information supplied by Moslem watchmen in the employ of the Wakf, who were on duty at the time, the Israel Police have arrested a suspect, a visitor of Australian nationality. His trial will be public, and open to observers from any country or faith.

The Government is willing to provide the material and technical assistance and other facilities that may be required by the Wakf for the repair of the damage caused by the fire, including the entry of experts from elsewhere deemed necessary by the Wakf.

Incidentally, fires have previously occurred in the Mosque in 1964, and in the Church of the Holy Sepulchre in 1949.

It is natural that the news of the outbreak of the fire in this Holy Place should have produced feelings of anguish and excitement among the local Moslem population. It says much for the sense of responsibility of this community that no serious disturbances took place, and calm was soon restored.

It is all the more regrettable that some Arab Governments have tried to exploit the occurrence for political and propaganda purposes. What is even more unpardonable is the attempt to inflame religious passions in the Moslem world, and to whip up hatred between the members of the two ancient and related faiths of Islam and Judaism. Such conduct can only exacerbate still further the unhappy conflict in the Middle East, the peaceful solution to which must surely be sought by all men of goodwill. The Government of Israel believes that all responsible Member States, Moslem and non-Moslem alike, will want to do whatever lies in their power to allay the emotions aroused by this grievous event, and to encourage understanding and tolerance between peoples and religious faiths.

I have the honour to request circulation of this letter as a document of the Security Council.

Please accept, etc.

(Signed) Yosef TEKOAH
Permanent Representative of Israel
to the United Nations
