



Iyad Twal is ordained to the episcopacy as auxiliary bishop of the Latin Patriarchate of Jerusalem at the Church of the Baptism of Christ in Al-Maghtas, Jordan by Cardinal Pierbattista Pizzaballa (Francesca Maria Lorenzini).



by Francesca Maria Lorenzini

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Al-Maghtas, Jordan — March 13, 2025

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The episcopal ceremony began in solemn reverence as Iyad Twal approached the altar. With a quiet yet profound act of submission, he prostrated himself before the Lord. The stillness in the air was broken only by the harmonious voices of the choir, rising in unison to sing the "Hymn of All Saints."

Cardinal Pierbattista Pizzaballa, Latin Patriarch of Jerusalem, gently placed the holy Bible upon Twal's head, and in that sacred silence, his head was anointed with holy chrism, the glistening oil symbolizing his consecration. As Twal ascended to the episcopacy, the choir's voices lifted in Psalm 110: "The Lord has sworn and will not change his mind."

On Feb. 28, Twal was ordained auxiliary bishop of the Latin Patriarchate of Jerusalem at the Church of the Baptism of Christ, becoming the first patriarchal vicar of Jordan to be ordained on Jordanian soil. His appointment by Pope Francis on Dec. 17, 2024, who assigned him the titular see of Siminina, came at a crucial time for the region, amidst the ongoing Gaza war and [increasing settler violence against Christian communities in the West Bank](#).

Born in Amman, Twal completed his studies in theology and philosophy at the Pontifical Lateran University in Rome and was ordained to the priesthood in 1998.

"I could see even then that he would reach this position," said Fr. Khalil Ja'ar, Twal's mentor during his seminary years.

After completing seminary, Twal served Catholic communities in the West Bank, initially as parish vicar and later as parish priest, while also taking on educational roles at the Latin Patriarchate schools in Israel and Palestine. Since 2013, he has held several positions at Bethlehem University, including executive vice president of the department of humanities and religious studies.



Cardinal Pierbattista Pizzaballa embraces Iyad Twal, the newly ordained auxiliary bishop of the Latin Patriarchate of Jerusalem. (Francesca Maria Lorenzini)

Twal has returned home to assume a role of great significance. He succeeded the late American Bishop Robert Patrick Maginnis as titular bishop of Siminia, whose see was vacant for two years, and is the first Jordanian to hold the auxiliary bishop position since Bishop Maroun Lahham, who retired in 2017.

In this position, Twal will support the Latin Patriarchate of Jerusalem in the pastoral and administrative management, ensuring that pastoral care is evenly distributed. The diocese was established in 1099 and is seated at the Church of the Holy Sepulchre, covering Israel, Jordan, Palestine and Cyprus.

"Sometimes people would like to dig into the nationality of the candidates, but I think we are beyond this," said Twal. "I am connected to Palestine and I am

connected to Jordan and to Galilee and to Cyprus. We are all part of this Holy Land."

Twal was ordained a priest in Madaba, a city with a rich Christian history and once a vibrant diocese in the fourth and fifth centuries, celebrated his first Mass there on March 1.

"It was very emotional and I wanted to deliver a message," he said. "I carried with me a copy of a Byzantine cross, [to say] that as we were here in Madaba centuries ago, here again we continue our mission in our beloved country as Christians of the Holy Land."

Twal also belongs to one of the most influential Christian tribes in Jordan. The tribal system is deeply embedded in Jordanian identity and plays a key role in governance, with tribal leaders managing local matters and overseeing aspects of criminal and civil law.

"It's a positive point, but it's not the main thing," said Imad Alamat, secretary general of the Latin Vicariate in Amman. "The bishop is in the service of the churches, of the faithful, of all the religions. So he is in the service of all the society of Jordan."

Jordanian Christians are more integrated into society than in many other Middle Eastern countries, holding a significant position in the kingdom's political and economic elite. But [their presence has diminished over time](#). While Christians made up about one-fifth of the population in 1930, they now constitute around 2% across all denominations. This decline is mainly due to higher birth rates among Muslims, significant Christian emigration and the influx of Muslim refugees from neighboring countries.

But Jordanian Christians continue to influence social and political life. Ahead of Jordan's parliamentary elections on Sept. 10, 2024, Pizzaballa [sent a message to the Christians of the Hashemite Kingdom](#), urging active participation in the elections.

"It was not a unique but significant call to go and vote on the part of the patriarch, in the sense of saying that everyone plays their role," said Paolo Maggiolini, associate professor in history and institutions of Asian and African countries at the Catholic University of Milan and expert on Arab Christianity in the Middle East.

Maggiolini also noted the historical connection between Jordan and Palestine, especially in relation to Catholic communities.

"We are entering the breath of a diocese that is inevitably transnational for the scope of the division of states, but then also a system of communicating vessels in the service to the diocese," he said.



Nuns praying during Iyad Twal's ordination as auxiliary bishop of the Latin Patriarchate of Jerusalem at the Church of the Baptism of Christ in Al-Maghtas, Jordan. (Sophie Constantin)

While Twal has dedicated many years of service in Palestine, fellow Auxiliary Bishop William Shomali, a Palestinian from the West Bank, has long served in parishes across Jordan, reflecting the shared vision and connection between the two regions. And Twal's theological studies explored the path of contextual theology in both Palestine-Israel and Jordan.

"We are different but we stand together," Twal said. "Because theology is rooted in each country and language."

Jordan is significantly shaped by Palestinian heritage. Since the 1948 Arab-Israeli War, or Nakba (Arabic for the catastrophe), Jordan has been a major host for Palestinian refugees, with waves of displacement continuing through subsequent conflicts. While the government does not officially distinguish between Jordanian and Palestinian citizens, it is estimated that 55% to 70% of Jordanians have Palestinian roots.

The ongoing Gaza war, [recognized as a genocide by several international organizations](#), has profoundly affected Jordan, sparking growing demands for the country to reconsider its relationship with Israel. Jordan [signed a peace treaty with Israel in 1994](#), making it one of only two Arab nations to do so, alongside Egypt.

The treaty also reaffirmed Jordan's role as the custodian of Jerusalem's Christian and Muslim holy sites. This responsibility was already established in 1924, when the Hashemite dynasty, under King Abdullah I, accepted it at the request of the Supreme Islamic Council.

But in recent years, some Jewish nationalist groups in Israel have questioned this role, arguing that Israel should have full control over Jerusalem and its holy sites. This became a bigger issue following the [U.S. President Donald Trump's 2017 recognition of Jerusalem as Israel's capital](#), sparking tensions with Arab nations, including Jordan.

In this context, the Hashemites' role as protectors of the holy sites is crucial for regional stability and national security. After the 1967 Six-Day War, or Naksa (Arabic for the setback), [when Israel occupied Palestinian territories](#) formerly under Jordanian administration, the dynasty's bond with Jordanian identity strengthened, making their responsibility for the holy sites even more vital.

"That role has historically been a symbol of their regional influence," Maggiolini said. "The conflict is essentially linked to a theme of political existence that leaves no room for any dimension to be independent from the conflict itself."

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He pointed out that Jordan is now experiencing a sense of diplomatic isolation as its relationship with the U.S. has shifted under both the Biden and Trump administrations, with the country being excluded from discussions on Israel and Palestine.

"For Jordan, the unpredictability of the external ally is a problem, because the foundation of a very active international policy relied on the fact that the foundation was stable — that is, the relationship with the West was non-negotiable, and the quality of this relationship was predictable," he added.

Regarding [Trump's recent comment on "cleaning out" Gaza](#), Maggiolini noted, "We are replicating the same thing, that [Jordan] is simply becoming [for Trump] the place where a part of the Gazans 'voluntarily' go."

Twal has a similar vision: "This is something that [happens] when you look at a country or people without knowing their history, without seeing the real reality, how they live and what they want, it's out of context, which means nonsense," he said.

Maggiolini suggests that if a new wave of Palestinian refugees from Gaza and the West Bank takes place, the Muslim population is likely to grow, with Christians remaining a minority, though he believes this shift will not negatively impact coexistence.

On the other hand, Alamat is confident in the Church's role. "The Church doesn't have all the tools to stop war, but the Church has always a good word to say, and to be on the ground, to make something," he said.