Episode Book

EPISODE #5500

Eight Consulates That Answer to No One

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SYNOPSIS

Eight countries — France, Belgium, Britain, Italy, Spain, Sweden, Greece, and Turkey — maintain consulates-general in Jerusalem whose diplomats report straight to their home foreign ministries, bypassing their own ambassadors in Tel Aviv. This episode traces where that strange arrangement comes from: sixteenth-century Ottoman capitulations, a seventeenth-century French consul named Jean Lempereur, a nineteenth-century wave of pilgrim-serving missions, and the corpus separatum — the UN's 1947 plan to internationalize Jerusalem that was never implemented but never revoked. We also look at the September 2026 move by Israel to shut Britain's East Jerusalem consulate, and why these missions function as a living fossil of a city that was supposed to be governed by nobody.

TRANSCRIPT



Corn

Here's a number that shouldn't make sense. Eight countries keep consulates in Jerusalem. France, Belgium, Britain, Italy, Spain, Sweden, Greece, Turkey. And not one of those consulates answers to Israel.



Herman

They answer to the Palestinian Authority. Their actual ambassadors sit in Tel Aviv, accredited to the State of Israel, and the consuls in Jerusalem report straight home to their foreign ministries, bypassing Tel Aviv entirely.



Corn

Daniel wrote in about this. He wants to know why that list exists. Why that particular mix of nations. What the corpus separatum actually is, and how it explains these missions. How foreign diplomatic presence in this city predates the corpus separatum, predates the modern division of the land, by a very long way. How church operations serving pilgrims turned into formal consulates-general. Why the chronology of all this gets blurred in the record. And why these consulates are now lightning rods, as Israel moves to take them out of the city. His words: this isn't random. It's a fossil record. So let's dig through the layers.



Herman

Start with what's on the ground right now, because it's moving fast. Belgium, France, Greece, Italy, Spain, Sweden, Turkey, and the UK all maintain consulates-general in Jerusalem. Plus the Vatican, which keeps something called an Apostolic Delegation, not a consulate. Every one of those countries also keeps a separate embassy in Tel Aviv.



Corn

Two missions, one country.



Herman

Two missions, and they don't talk to each other. The consul-general in Jerusalem is not subordinate to the ambassador in Tel Aviv. That's the anomaly. Normal diplomatic practice says every mission in a country reports up through the ambassador. Here, the consul reports directly to the foreign ministry back home. The structure is a quiet echo of



Herman (continued)

a city that was supposed to be governed by nobody.



Corn

And in September, Israel gave Britain thirty days to close its consulate in East Jerusalem, revoked its diplomats' accreditation, and told British officials in Ramallah and at the Gaza coordination centre to leave within seven days. Israeli media reported Israel weighing the same move against France. First time this whole arrangement is being actively dismantled.



Herman

Which raises the question the whole episode hangs on. What is this arrangement, legally? Because there are two answers on the record and they can't both be right. One says these consulates are a soft echo of the corpus separatum, the Jerusalem that never was. The other says they violate the Oslo Accords outright.



Corn

Both claims are written down. That disagreement is the story.



Herman

The list looks random until you sort it by religion. France, Italy, Spain, Belgium. Catholic. Russia and Greece. Orthodox. Britain and Germany. Protestant. It maps almost perfectly onto the nineteenth-century protectorate system, where each European power claimed a denomination and a set of holy places to look after.



Corn

So it's not a diplomatic list. It's a church list wearing diplomatic clothes.



Herman

That's the fossil record Daniel's pointing at. These aren't states that happen to have interests in Jerusalem. They're states that inherited a role, mostly a religious one, from an empire that no longer exists.



Corn

Go back further. Where does the legal authority for any of this come from?



Herman

The Ottoman capitulations. From the sixteenth century onward, the Sultan granted foreign powers extraterritorial rights. Consuls could move freely, trade freely, settle their nationals. Consular courts handled civil and criminal cases involving foreign subjects. That's the deep root. It predates any modern international law framework by centuries.



Corn

So a French consul in Jerusalem in eighteen hundred wasn't operating under a treaty in the modern sense. He was operating under a deal with the Sultan.



Herman

A unilateral grant, revocable in theory, permanent in practice. And it's why consuls had powers that would look bizarre today. They ran their own courts. They protected their own nationals from Ottoman law. That's the template.



Corn

And the first continuous European presence?



Herman

France, sixteen twenty-three. A consul named Jean Lempereur. France had assumed the role of protector of Catholics in the East, and that role came with a man on the ground in Jerusalem. That's the first continuous diplomatic presence in Palestine.



Corn

Two hundred years before the corpus separatum.



Herman

Nearly three hundred and twenty-five. The corpus separatum is a twentieth-century idea. The French consulate is a seventeenth-century fact.



Corn

So the missions predate the modern division of the land. They predate the Mandate. They predate Zionism as a political movement.



Herman

All of it. And that's the part Daniel's asking about. The diplomatic presence in Jerusalem isn't a response to the conflict. The conflict happened around a diplomatic presence that was already there.



Corn

Then the mid-nineteenth century. What changed?



Herman

Pilgrim traffic exploded. Steam navigation, better roads, the Tanzimat reforms opening the empire up. Suddenly you have thousands of European pilgrims a year, church institutions buying land, schools, hospitals, orphanages. And the consulates follow the pilgrims. Britain eighteen thirty-nine. Prussia eighteen forty-two. France and Piedmont-Sardinia eighteen forty-three. The United States eighteen forty-four, fully functional by eighteen fifty-six. Austria eighteen forty-nine. Belgium eighteen fifty-one. Spain eighteen fifty-three or fifty-four. Russia eighteen fifty-eight. Greece eighteen sixty-two.



Corn

That's the wave.



Herman

And notice what most of them are doing. Not trade. Not strategy. Practical services for pilgrims and church institutions. Visas, legal protection, disputes over holy sites, probate when a pilgrim died in the city. The consulate was the institution that handled the paperwork of pilgrimage.



Corn

The church operations become consulates.



Herman

There's a case study that shows the entanglement perfectly. Eighteen forty-seven, the Latin Patriarchate is re-established. The first patriarch is Joseph Valerga, an Arabic-speaking diplomat from the Holy See. And France initially opposed it.



Corn

France opposed the re-establishment of a Catholic patriarchate?



Herman

Because France feared Britain would install an Anglican bishop in Jerusalem if the Catholic structure stayed weak. The French protectorate over Catholics was a French national asset. A strong Latin Patriarchate could dilute it. So the church question and the diplomatic question were the same question.



Corn

That's the whole pattern in one episode. A patriarchate as a diplomatic chess piece.



Herman

Then eighteen seventy-eight. The Treaty of Berlin ratifies the Status Quo on the Christian holy sites. That locks in the arrangement. France protects Catholics, Russia protects the Orthodox. The protectorates become formal.



Corn

And by the First World War?



Herman

Six general consulates in Jerusalem. France and Russia, eighteen ninety-three. Persia, nineteen oh one. Greece and Italy, nineteen oh two. Germany, nineteen fourteen. And here's the institutional detail that survives to today. Those consuls answered directly to their foreign ministries. Not through the ambassadors in Istanbul.



Corn

The same reporting structure we started with.



Herman

Identical. The consul-general in Jerusalem in nineteen hundred reported home directly. The consul-general in Jerusalem in twenty twenty-six reports home directly. The line runs straight through.



Corn

So the anomaly isn't an anomaly. It's a hundred-and-thirty-year-old habit.



Herman

That's why it's so hard to dislodge. It's not a policy anyone chose recently. It's a groove worn into the system.



Corn

Now the blurring. Why does the chronology get so messy?



Herman

Because the missions opened, closed, and reopened across the collapse of the Ottoman Empire, the First World War, the Mandate, and nineteen forty-eight. France's consulate closed at the start of the eighteenth century and reopened in eighteen forty-three. The Italian consulate lapsed between eighteen forty-nine and eighteen seventy-one. The British consulate ran eighteen thirty-nine to nineteen fourteen, then again from nineteen forty-eight until now. The American consulate ran eighteen forty-four to twenty nineteen.



Corn

Two lives for the British one.



Herman

Two lives, nearly two centuries apart, same building lineage. And the sources disagree on dates. Spain is eighteen fifty-three in some accounts, eighteen fifty-four in others. Britain is eighteen thirty-eight or eighteen thirty-nine depending on who you read. And the terminology was loose. Consulate, consulate-general, vice-consulate, agency. They used the words interchangeably.



Corn

So the record is fuzzy.



Herman

Not because anyone's hiding anything. Because the institutions themselves were fuzzy. A vice-consulate could be one man in a rented room handling mail and passports. Whether that counts as a founding date is a judgment call.



Corn

And that's before we get to the corpus separatum.



Herman

Which is where the modern legal fiction gets its name. And where the story gets strange.



Corn

Twenty-nine November, nineteen forty-seven. UN General Assembly Resolution one eighty-one.



Herman

Adopts the corpus separatum. Latin for separated body. The proposal was to internationalise Jerusalem and its surroundings under a special international regime, administered by the UN Trusteeship Council. A city governed by the United Nations.



Corn

And where did the idea come from?



Herman

The Vatican, largely. The Holy See had argued for decades that the Christian holy places needed international protection, going back before the British Mandate. And the historic French and Italian protectorates over Catholic interests fed into it. The corpus separatum is a religious concern dressed as a territorial solution.



Corn

The missing keystone.



Herman

The Vatican is the origin of the idea. And the Vatican today keeps only an Apostolic Delegation in Jerusalem, not a consulate. The whole architecture is about holy sites, not statecraft, and the one party most invested in the holy sites keeps the lightest footprint.



Corn

So what happened to the plan?



Herman

It was never implemented. Rejected by Arab leaders. Overtaken by the nineteen forty-eight war, which left West Jerusalem under Israel and East Jerusalem under Jordan. Resolution one ninety-four in December forty-eight reaffirmed internationalisation. Resolution three oh three in December forty-nine reaffirmed it again. The Trusteeship Council even approved a draft statute on the fourth of April, nineteen fifty.



Corn

And then?



Herman

Nothing. Never implemented. The UN has never revoked Resolutions one eighty-one and one ninety-four. The European Union still regards Jerusalem as having corpus separatum status. The plan died in practice and lives on in law.



Corn

A legal ghost.



Herman

A legal ghost that shapes the structure of eight consulates. Because Jerusalem's status is unresolved, these missions are not diplomatic missions to Israel. They're not diplomatic missions to the Palestinian Authority either. They're diplomatic missions to Jerusalem.



Corn

To the city.



Herman

The consul-general reports directly to the home foreign ministry, not through the ambassador in Tel Aviv. And that structure, in the words of the standard reference on this, could be considered to some degree as reflecting the corpus separatum which never came into existence.



Corn

So the consulates are the corpus separatum in operational form. The city that was never internationalised is still being treated, structurally, as if it were.



Herman

That's the soft echo. And Turkey takes it one step further. Turkey's consul-general in Jerusalem is simultaneously accredited as Turkey's ambassador to the State of Palestine. One man, two roles, one city.



Corn

Now the contradiction.



Herman

Israeli commentators argue the Oslo Two Accord expressly prohibits establishing a consulate for the Palestinian Authority. Article nine, section five, signed the twenty-eighth of September, nineteen ninety-five. If that reading is correct, these consulates aren't a soft echo of a UN resolution. They're a violation of a signed agreement.



Corn

And the corpus separatum framing?



Herman

The standard reference on the consulates notes the corpus separatum link is inferred. Citation needed. So you have one side saying the consulates reflect a UN resolution that was never implemented, and another side saying they violate an agreement that was implemented. Both on the record. Neither reconciled.



Corn

Which one's right?



Herman

I don't know. Honestly. The corpus separatum reading is descriptive. It explains the structure. The Oslo reading is legal. It explains the objection. They might both be true in different registers. What I can say is that the disagreement is real and it's unresolved, and that's precisely why these consulates are now in the crosshairs.



Corn

The present flashpoint. Britain.



Herman

The British consulate sits in Sheikh Jarrah, in East Jerusalem. Its work focused on Palestinian issues in the territories. Gaza, the West Bank, Jerusalem. Meanwhile the UK ambassador to Israel sits in Tel Aviv. Two missions, one country, same as everyone else on the list.



Corn

And on the eighth of September, the UK announced an import ban on all goods from illegal Israeli settlements.



Herman

Eleven other countries plus Canada endorsed or joined. France, Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Ireland, Norway, Poland, Portugal, Spain, Sweden. The Foreign Secretary described settler violence as ethnic cleansing.



Corn

Israel retaliated the same day.



Herman

Closure of the British consulate. Entry bans on twelve mostly-left MPs, including Jeremy Corbyn, Diane Abbott, Zarah Sultana, John McDonnell. Termination of UK training of Palestinian Authority security forces. Exclusion of Britain from the Gaza coordination mission. Then the thirty-day deadline on the ninth.



Corn

And the framing from the Israeli foreign minister.



Herman

Gideon Sa'ar. United Jerusalem is the capital of Israel and is under its full sovereignty. Any foreign activity in the area must be conducted through accepted and agreed channels and without violating Israel's sovereignty. He called the UK move morally distorted and blatant interference in the affairs of a sovereign state and its electoral process.



Corn

The election being October twenty-seventh.



Herman

The scheduled general election. Sa'ar's point is that the sanctions were timed to influence it.



Corn

And Washington?



Herman

Marco Rubio said Washington would not follow Britain, France, and Canada, and didn't want anything destabilising in the West Bank. The US ambassador to Israel called the British sanctions discrimination against the Jewish people.



Corn

There's a precedent for what closure looks like. The American consulate.



Herman

Ran eighteen forty-four to twenty nineteen. Merged into the US embassy after the embassy moved to Jerusalem. That ended the American practice of running separate missions to Israelis and Palestinians. So there's a template. A consulate that existed for a hundred and seventy-five years, folded into an embassy, gone.



Corn

And the British one ran eighteen thirty-nine to nineteen fourteen, then nineteen forty-eight to twenty twenty-six. Closure ends a nearly two-century institutional lineage.



Herman

The first of the modern corpus to fall. If the British one goes, the question is whether the rest follow. Israeli media reported Israel weighing the same move against France.



Corn

So the whole architecture is on the table. The consulates are living remnants of Ottoman-era religious diplomacy, and they're being removed in real time.



Herman

One detail worth sitting with. The Vatican. If the whole architecture is about holy sites, the Apostolic Delegation is the keystone. And nobody's talking about it.



Corn

Because it's not a consulate.



Herman

It's not. It's a delegation. Different legal animal. But it's the one mission that most clearly descends from the original religious purpose, and it's the one nobody's moving against.



Corn

Which tells you something about what this is really about.



Herman

It tells you the fight isn't about the holy places. It's about the political status of the city. The consulates are a proxy.



Hilbert

It's eighteen forty-four, not eighteen thirty-nine.



Corn

What?



Hilbert

The American consulate. You said eighteen forty-four. That's when the appointment was made. It wasn't fully functional until eighteen fifty-six. Two different dates, both correct.



Herman

That's fair. The research does say fully functional by fifty-six.



Hilbert

I worked in one of these. A consulate with the same reporting structure. Consul-general answered to the ministry directly. Ignored the ambassador entirely. There were memos about the Jerusalem precedent. Cited it as justification for our own independence.



Corn

So the structure exports.



Hilbert

It exports. And the memos were about mail. Everyone thinks these missions were about holy places. Some of it was. A lot of it was post.



Herman

Post.



Hilbert

Consular courts and extraterritoriality meant foreign powers could run their own postal services. That's how a lot of these missions made their money and justified their staff. You had a consul, two clerks, and a mail operation. The ledgers were mostly stamps.



Corn

So the sacred diplomacy was partly a postal racket.



Hilbert

Partly. I've still got the ledgers from that consulate. In a box. They're in the flat, under the window, next to the radiator. My brother-in-law says they're worthless. He's not to be trusted on anything involving paper.



Herman

Why not?



Hilbert

He sold his own stamp collection twice. Once to a dealer, once to me. I've still got them. Anyway. The point stands. Mail was the business. The holy places were the cover story, and everyone knew it.



Corn

That reframes the whole list.



Hilbert

It reframes the money. The list is still a church list. The church list just had a post office attached.



Herman

So the missions weren't purely religious. They were practical services and revenue.



Hilbert

Practical services and revenue. Same as any consulate. Same as any office. You find a service nobody else is providing and you charge for it.



Corn

And the corpus separatum?



Hilbert

That's the legal key. You've got that right. I'm not arguing with you. I'm just saying the key opens a door with a mail slot in it.



Herman

I'll take that.



Hilbert

I've got to go. An animal is expecting me.



Corn

Go.



Herman

So the odd mix was never random. It's a fossil record of a world where diplomacy was about pilgrims, post, and protection. And that world is being dismantled right now, starting with the British consulate in Sheikh Jarrah.



Corn

If the British one closes, does the rest of the corpus follow? And what happens to the Vatican's Apostolic Delegation, the keystone, if the whole architecture turns out to be about holy sites and not statecraft?



Herman

The legal fiction of the corpus separatum doesn't die with the consulates. It persists as a ghost. The UN has never revoked the resolutions. The EU still regards Jerusalem as having that status. You can close a consulate. You can't close a resolution.



Corn

That's the thing to hold onto. The corpus separatum was never implemented, and it's never been repealed. It's a city that exists in law and nowhere else, and eight consulates were built to serve it.



Herman

Thanks to Hilbert Flumingtop, our producer, for the postal correction.



Corn

This has been My Weird Prompts. If you want to send us a prompt, email us at show at my weird prompts dot com.



Herman

We'll be back soon.



Corn

See you then.