

The Vatican and the Middle East:

Pope John Paul II's Trip to the Holy Land

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Brief Analysis

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Background Historically the Vatican's view of Israel and Zionism was negative. The Vatican explicitly told Herzl that that the Jews were meant to wander, and if they set foot on Palestinian soil the Christians would be there to convert them.

The main concern of the Catholic Church regarding the Holy Land has long been to maintain the status quo of the Catholic holy places. For many years, the Church supported the creation of Jerusalem as an entity independent from the surrounding states--a corpus separatum. But in the 1970s, the Vatican spoke instead of international guarantees for the holy places, an idea that remains Vatican policy today.

Current Issues In 1993, an accord was signed between the Vatican and Israel in which the Vatican formally recognized Israel. The Vatican bureaucracy had been opposed to this accord because it wanted to tie recognition to the settlement of several outstanding issues, particularly the legal and tax status of the Church. But John Paul II insisted that the symbolic act of recognition come first. In the subsequent seven years, negotiations on the legal and tax status of the Church have gone slowly, and this will be an issue during the papal visit. Other issues include access to the Catholic holy places (of which the current situation in Nazareth raises problems), the upkeep and sanctity of the areas surrounding the holy places, and concern about the declining Christian population in the West Bank in contrast to the rising Christian population in Israel.

Israel views the pope in his current visit not only as a pilgrim, but also as a political figure; Israelis welcome the pope's visit as a validation of the state of Israel by the Catholic Church. The last visit of a pope to Israel occurred in 1964. During this visit the pope did not stay overnight in Israel and refused to acknowledge Israel's statehood.

The pope does not view this trip as political; therefore, he will not focus on specific topics regarding the peace process--though he may touch upon the refugee issue in the context of his discussion about human rights. Furthermore, the pope is expected to treat Palestinian Authority (PA) leader Yasir Arafat with full diplomatic protocol and in doing so will advance Arafat's status as a "head of state." The Vatican and the PA signed an agreement at the end of 1999, but a momentous aspect of that agreement was not widely noticed: namely, the PA's recognition of freedom of conscience, which implicitly includes the right to convert from Islam to another religion. This was the first time an Arab state has accepted such a right.

GEORGE WEIGEL

The pope's trip next week is first and foremost a personal pilgrimage. This pilgrimage is part of the Catholic Church's jubilee year and a reminder that the year 2000 is not an accident but rather an act of God.

Pope John Paul II and the State of Israel In December 1963, Karol Joseph Wojtyla, the future John Paul II, went on his first journey to the Holy Land. During this trip, he developed a strong sense of intrigue for the Holy Land and ever

since has yearned to return. Pope John Paul II is the first pope to publicly acknowledge the state of Israel, an acknowledgement that he made in a public speech delivered in 1980.

Within the Israeli government there is a great deal of ignorance regarding the Catholic Church. Israeli officials do not always keep in mind that the pope is the head of the Church as well as the leader of a very small state. Although the visit of the pope is a pilgrimage, he is also a de facto head of state and will be treated as such. Still, the fine line between spiritual and political acts of the pope during the trip is one that is bound to cause confusion. The bottom line is that the pope is not going to the Holy Land in a political capacity, and his actions should therefore be perceived as those of a pilgrim, not a head of state.

Pope John Paul II and Judaism Pope John Paul II has done more to further dialogue between Catholics and Jews than has any previous pope. Much of this may have to do with his upbringing in a town that was 20 percent Jewish as well as his active cultural resistance to the slaughter of the Jews during World War II. His strong commitment to the second Vatican Council, which led to a greater understanding of Judaism by Catholics, was also of great importance to the expansion of this dialogue.

In 1983, Pope John Paul II visited the synagogue in Rome as the first pope to make such a gesture. The pope has also made a declaration condemning anti-Semitism and has characterized Judaism as the "older brother" of Catholicism.

This commitment to the continuation of dialogue between Jews and Catholics is firmly in place and will endure after John Paul II. The dialogue will best flourish in the United States because of its vibrant and secure Jewish community as well as its curious and eager Catholic community, which actively reach out and educate themselves about their Jewish neighbors. The exchange is not projected to go as far within Europe or the Middle East where the two communities are in much different circumstances than in the United States.

In the mind of the pope, the diplomatic issues between Israel and the Vatican and the relationship between the Jews and the Vatican have become integrated. At the same time, these two matters are treated in entirely different parts of the Vatican bureaucracy, which should be borne in mind when considering how the Vatican reacts on these issues.

◆ This Special Policy Forum Report was prepared by Erika Reff.

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