

Pope Francis: Making Sense of a Whirlwind Middle East Tour

After two intense days of religious ceremonies in Bethlehem and Jerusalem, meetings with Israeli and Palestinian officials, unscheduled photo opportunities and debilitating traffic arrangements, Israelis and interfaith relations experts are trying to attach the appropriate symbolism to Pope Francis' visit to the region.

Nearly every stop made by the pontiff was subjected to simultaneous scrutiny and praise. While long-term tensions between the Jewish people and the Catholic Church were made apparent by the trip, some experts are acknowledging a thaw in Israel-Vatican relations.

"The Jewish people and the Catholic Church in recent years have found that their 30 years of dialogue have paid off and friendly relationships have resulted," says Betty Ehrenberg, executive director of the North American branch of the World Jewish Congress and chairperson of the International Jewish Committee on Interreligious Consultations, an umbrella organization representing prominent Jewish organizations in discussions with leaders of other faiths.

Ehrenberg, who attended a meeting between the pope and Israeli President Shimon Peres, told that there is "a friendship between the Catholic Church and the Jewish people that should be nurtured" and that there "certainly was a warmth to this visit, and you can't deny that."

"We have to realize that we have problems in common, and we have to work together on these problems," she said.

Also important, in Ehrenberg's estimation, is the message that the visit sends to Middle East Christians who find themselves under the constant threat of attack.

“There has been very little outcry [on Christian suffering] by the United Nations; there has been very little outcry by other international organizations,” Ehrenberg says. “We haven’t heard enough of an outcry, not from the Catholic Church and not from any of the Christian denominations. In fact, it has been the Jewish people that have been decrying this phenomenon.”

But by visiting the Middle East, the pope “has shown that he is present and that he cares, and gives Christians here in the region strength,” she says.

“Hopefully we can work together with the Catholic Church to help ensure religious freedoms for everyone around the world, and for protection,” she says.

Pope Francis planted roots for improved interfaith relations even before being elected pontiff, says Giuseppe Platania, founder of Italy’s Israel Allies Caucus, an alliance that fosters cooperation and dialogue between the Italian Senate and the Israeli Knesset.

“He is a friend of the Jewish people, probably more than others before him,” Platania told . “He appears to be very open to dialogue with the Jewish community. Back in Argentina, the pope had a strong relationship with the Jewish community. So he grew up with a strong, positive relationship with the Jewish community from before he became pope.”

Platania says Francis made a “significant” symbolic gesture during his first week as pope by making a phone call to the chief rabbi of the Jewish community in Rome.

“When you become a leader of over a billion people, what you do carries tremendous weight,” Platania says.

Appropriately, then, every stop by Pope Francis on his Israel trip—planned and unplanned—was scrutinized for its symbolism.

“His itinerary is very significant,” Platania says. “What he goes to visit first was very well thought out. The actual order of the people he sees and shakes hands with and the sites he visits is very significant.”

The pope referred to Palestinian Authority-controlled territory as the “Palestinian state,” a move that contradicts the U.N. status of the Palestinian Authority as a nonmember observer state. Francis also landed first in the Palestinian city of Bethlehem a day before his official state welcome by Israel at Ben-Gurion International Airport.

According to Platania, Francis is not the first pope to visit Palestinian-controlled territory before setting foot in fully sovereign Jewish territory, and the order of the pope’s itinerary may have had more to do with religion than politics. The New Testament identifies Bethlehem as the birthplace of Jesus.

“Maybe there is a stronger Christian connection to start [the trip] by going to Bethlehem than by going to the Kotel,” Platania says.

Ehrenberg says there is nothing new about the Vatican’s policy toward Palestinian statehood.

“The Vatican recognized a Palestinian state many years ago already,” she says. “So anyone surprised by this doesn’t remember when this first happened in the ’80s.”

The pope then surprised many by making an unscheduled prayer stop at concrete sections of a wall separating Bethlehem from Jerusalem, erected in 2002 to prevent terror infiltrations into Jewish population centers. He prayed in front of graffiti that read “Free Palestine” and (in broken English) “Bethlehem look like Warsaw Ghetto,” leading to widely distributed photos.

Ehrenberg says the photo-op in front of the Israeli security fence “can be interpreted as some kind of a PR coup for the Palestinians” but that Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu addressed the issue when he spoke to the pope “and explained that the fence was built particularly to prevent the acts of terror that the international community is so against.”

“It’s not because Israel wanted to build it there,” Ehrenberg says of the fence. “It was forced upon Israel by terrorist attacks. [Netanyahu] showed the Pope the plaque remembering the horrific terrorist attacks that were perpetrated [at the AMIA Jewish center] in Buenos Aires, which the pope knows only all too well.”

Platania says, “This pope is coming across as very charismatic, very people-oriented. Some people think that’s great. Other people think he has an agenda. Praying at the security wall was a sign of peace, but I wonder if he wanted to come across as exposing the wall and Israeli policy.”

Even “the best of our friends, eventually even with the best intentions, may want to use that friendliness, the diplomatic efforts, smiles and phone calls to rabbis to help promote their own agendas,” Platania explains.

A longer-term issue between Israel and the Vatican relates to valuable Jewish artifacts dating back to the period of the First Temple in Jerusalem and believed to be held in Vatican archives that have been off-limits to Jewish leaders.

“The issue of artifacts is a big deal,” Platania says. “Many people have asked to visit the archive and have been denied. It is believed that there are a lot of items that belong to Jewish heritage on all levels—things that could potentially be from the Temple, but even if they are not, still belong to the Jewish people and could be given back.”

Returning the items, according to Platania, would be an

“amazing act of reconciliation and friendship.”

Yet the Israeli government appears patient on the artifacts issue and is hopeful that there is much to be gained by improving relations with the Vatican. Peres and Palestinian Authority President Mahmoud Abbas, meanwhile, accepted an invitation from the pope to pray for peace at the Vatican. That gathering is scheduled for June 6.

“The relationships certainly will continue and will deepen,” Ehrenberg says. “Shimon Peres is going to visit the pope in two weeks, so let’s see where that leads.”

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