

Pope Francis Prime ISIS Target, Says Iraq's Ambassador

Pope Francis faces no specific threat from Islamic State militants and will not be adding extra security measures on his one-day trip to Albania next week, the Vatican said.

The Vatican's chief spokesman, the Rev. Federico Lombardi, said despite recent "worrying" events that had shocked the world, there was no specific threat to the 77-year-old pontiff as he prepared for his official visit to the majority Muslim country on Sunday.

Lombardi said Francis would use the same open-topped vehicle he uses to greet crowds in St. Peter's Square when he travels to the Albanian capital, Tirana.

"There is no reason to change the pope's itinerary," Lombardi said. "We are obviously paying attention, but there is no need for concern or a change to his program in Albania."

Lombardi's low-key approach reflects the Vatican's overall handling of Francis' security on trips outside the Vatican, including downplaying concerns that Francis was a target for organized crime bosses during recent trips to the heart of Italy's mafia country.

Iraq's ambassador to the Holy See, Habeeb Al Sadr, warned there was no doubt the pope was one of the prime targets for Islamic State militants. Italian media have also published unconfirmed reports that Albanian security services were concerned about the pontiff's safety.

"We know very well how these terrorists think," Al Sadr told the daily *Il Mattino*. "Their objectives are known. I would not

exclude [the possibility] that ISIS will come to strike him.”

Francis is scheduled to travel to Tirana for an intense day of activities that includes celebrating Mass in Mother Teresa Square and meeting Muslim, Catholic and Orthodox leaders in a bid to build greater interfaith dialogue.

“There is no particular reason for concern,” Lombardi added. “Of course we are all worried over news about ISIS and the situation in the Middle East, but there are no risks or specific threats.”

Lombardi said Francis wanted to visit Albania to highlight the rebirth of Christianity and martyrs who died for their faith under communist rule, and to bring attention to how Catholics, Orthodox and Muslims were working together to govern the country.

St. John Paul II was the first pope to travel to Albania in 1993, and Lombardi said he re-established the Catholic hierarchy by ordaining four bishops during his voyage.

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