

Stepping into a Religious and Political Minefield: The Pope's "Unbalanced Neutrality" in the Holy Land

By [Nicola Nasser](#)

Global Research, June 04, 2014

Region: [Middle East & North Africa](#)

Theme: [Religion](#)

In-depth Report: [PALESTINE](#)

Pope Francis' "pilgrimage" to the Holy Land last week proved to be an unbalanced impossible mission. The pontiff failed to strike a balance of neutrality between contradictory and irreconcilable binaries like divinity and earth, religion and politics, justice and injustice and military occupation and peace.

Such neutrality is viewed by the laity of Christian believers, let alone Muslim ones, in the Holy Land as religiously, morally and politically unacceptable.

The 77-year old head of the world's 1.2 billion Catholics "is stepping into a religious and political minefield," Naim Ateek, the Anglican priest who founded the Palestinian liberation theology movement and runs the Sabeel Ecumenical Center in Jerusalem and Nazareth, was quoted as saying by "Time" on last May 24, the first day of the pope's "pilgrimage."

Ironically, the symbolic moral and spiritual power of the Holy See was down to earth in Pope Francis' subservient adaptation to the current *realpolitik* of the Holy Land in what the Catholic Online on May 26 described as "faith diplomacy."

The pontiff's message to the Palestinian people during his three-day "pilgrimage" to the Holy Land boils down to an endorsement of the Israeli and U.S. message to them, i.e.: "The only route to peace" is to negotiate with the Israeli occupying power, refrain from unilateral actions and "violent" resistance and recognize Israel as a fait accompli.

The UK-based Jordanian-Palestinian journalist Lamis Andoni, a Christian herself, wrote on May 27: "We don't need the Vatican blessing of negotiations ... Whoever sees occupation and remains neutral has no justice in his vision."

The Vatican and the pope himself had insisted that his visit to the birthplace of the three monotheistic "Abrahamic faiths" of Islam, Christianity and Judaism was "purely spiritual," "strictly religious," a "pilgrimage for prayer" and "absolutely not political."

But the Vatican expert John Allen, writing in the Boston Globe a week ahead of the pope's visit, had expected it to be a "political high-wire act," and that what it truly was, because "religion and politics cannot be separated in the Holy Land," according to Yolande Knell on BBC online on May 25.

Pope Francis would have performed much better had he adhered "strictly," "purely" and "absolutely" to making his trip a "pilgrimage for prayer" and one that is committed to

Christian unity and to helping indigenous Christians survive the highly volatile and violent regional environment.

Instead he had drowned his spiritual role in a minefield of symbolic political semantics and semiotics.

The pope finished his “pilgrimage,” which was announced as a religious one but turned instead into a political pilgrimage, with a call for peace.

However, the grand mufti of Jerusalem , Muhammad Hussein, while welcoming the pontiff inside Islam’s third holiest site of Al-Aqsa Mosque on May 26, said: “Peace in this land will not happen until the end of the [Israeli military] occupation.”

Palestinian-American Daoud Kuttab on May 25 wrote in a controversial column that the pope “exceeded expectations for Palestinians.”

He flew directly from Jordan to Bethlehem in Palestine without passing through any Israeli entry procedures, implicitly and symbolically recognizing Palestinian sovereignty.

He addressed the Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas as the head of the “State of Palestine,” announced that there must be “recognition of the right of the Palestinian people to a sovereign homeland and their right to live with dignity and with freedom of movement” and met with Palestinian children whose parents were refugees whom Israelis displaced from their homes in 1948.

And in an undeniable expression of solidarity with the Palestinians, he made an unplanned stop to pray at Israel ’s apartheid wall of segregation in Bethlehem, because, as he said, “the time has come to put an end to this situation which has become increasingly unacceptable.”

However, the word “occupation” was missing in more than thirteen of his speeches during his “pilgrimage” as was any reference to world’s “largest open-air prison” in Gaza Strip or to Dahiyat a-Salam (literally: Neighborhood of Peace) and other five neighbourhoods in eastern Jerusalem, including the Shu’fat Refugee Camp, where some eighty thousand Palestinians were cut off from the city services, including water, since March 2014 and isolated from Jerusalem by Israel’s segregation wall. His itinerary did not include the Galilee and Nazareth where most Palestinian Christians are located.

Eight papal messages

However, within less than twenty four hours the pontiff was to offset his positive overtures to Palestinians and his call for a “just solution” and a “stable peace based on justice” for the Palestinian-Israeli conflict with eight messages to them.

The pontiff’s arrival in the Palestinian Holy Land came three days before Israel’s celebration of its 47th anniversary of its military occupation and annexation of the Christian and Muslim holy sites in the Arab east Jerusalem and ten days after the Palestinian commemoration of the 66th anniversary of their Nakba on the creation of Israel in 1948 on the ruins of more than 500 towns and villages from which the Zionist paratroops ethnically cleansed forcefully more than 800,000 Arab Muslim and Christian native Palestinians.

The pope had nothing to say or do on both occasions to alleviate the ensuing plight of the Palestinians except prayers, because “the concrete measures for peace must come from negotiations ... It is the only route to peace,” according to the pope aboard his flight back to Rome.

That was exactly the same futile message the Israeli occupying power and its U.S. strategic ally have been sending to Palestinians for sixty six years, but especially since 1967: Palestinians should be held hostages to exclusively bilateral negotiations with their occupying power. This was the pope’s first message to Palestinians.

For this purpose, the pope invited Palestinian and Israeli presidents, Abbas and Shimon Peres, to pray for peace at “my home in the Vatican as a place for this encounter of prayer” on June 8. *The pope’s spokesman, Federico Lombardi, told the BBC it was “a papal peace initiative.” This was his second message”.*

His third message to Palestinians was to “refrain from initiatives and actions which contradict the stated desire to reach a true agreement” with Israel, i.e. to refrain from unilateral actions, which is again another Israeli and U.S. precondition which both allies do not deem as deserving Israeli reciprocity.

By laying a wreath at the grave of Theodor Herzl, the atheist founder of Zionism who nonetheless believed in God’s promise of the land to His Jewish “chosen people,” the pope legitimized Herzl’s colonial settlement project in Palestine . This was his fourth message: Israel is a fait accompli recognized by the Vatican and blessed by the papacy and Palestinians have to adapt accordingly. The Washington Post on May 23 went further. “[Some are interpreting](#)” the pope’s act “as the pontiff’s tacit recognition of the country’s Jewish character.”

The pope sent his fifth message to Palestinians when he addressed young Palestinian refugees from the Dehiyshe Refugee Camp in Bethlehem : “Don’t ever allow the past to determine your life, always look forward.” He was repeating the Israeli and U.S. call on Palestinian refugees to forget their Nakba and look forward from their refugee camps for an unknown future in exile and diaspora.

On the same occasion he sent his sixth message: “Violence cannot be defeated by violence; violence can only be defeated with peace,” the pope advised the young Palestinian refugees. This is again the Israeli and U.S. message to them, which after more than two decades of Palestinian commitment produced neither peace nor justice for them.

The pope prayed at the Holocaust memorial, the western al-Buraq Wall of Al-Aqsa Mosque, which Israelis call “The Wailing Wall,” the memorial of the Israeli victims of Palestinian resistance, laid a wreath at Herzl’s grave, visited Israeli president at his residence where he “vowed to pray for the institutions of the State of Israel,” which are responsible for the Palestinian Nakba, and received Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu at the Notre Dame complex. The pontiff was in fact blessing and granting the Vatican legitimacy to all the Israeli symbolic casus belli claims to the land, which justify the Palestinian Nakba. This was his seventh message.

All those events took place in Jerusalem , which Israel annexed as the “eternal” capital of the Hebrew state and the “Jewish people.” Reuven Berko, writing in Yisrael Hayom, said that the Pope’s meetings with Peres and Netanyahu were “de facto expressions of the Vatican ‘s

recognition of Jerusalem as capital of Israel .”

The pope’s eighth message to Palestinians was on the future of Jerusalem : “From the negotiations perhaps it will emerge that it will be the capital of one State or another ... I do not consider myself competent to say that we should do one thing or another.”

Normalization with Israel

The “greatest importance” of Pope Francis’ visit “may lie in the fact that it reflects the normalization of relations between the Vatican and the State of Israel,” head of the Anti-Defamation League, Abraham Foxman, wrote on May 23.

The Second Vatican Council early in the sixties of the last century rejected the collective Jewish guilt for Jesus Christ’s death. Since then the Vatican ’s “normalization” of relations with the Jews and Israel has been accumulating.

Rabbi David Rosen, director of inter-religious affairs at the American Jewish Committee, was quoted as saying by the USA Today on May 26: There “has been a revolution in the Christian world.”

At Ben-Gurion airport on May 25, Pope Francis reiterated his predecessor Benedict’s call for “the right of existence for the [still borderless] State of Israel to be recognized universally,” but was wise enough not to reiterate his “thanks to God” because “the Jews returned to the lands of their ancestors.”

To emphasise interfaith coexistence he broke the precedent of including a Jewish rabbi and a Muslim sheikh in his official delegation. “It’s highly symbolic,” said Rev. Thomas Rosica, a consultant to the Vatican press office.

By laying a wreath of white and yellow flowers, the colours of the Vatican , on the Herzl’s grave, the pope broke another historic precedent. It was an unbalanced act, 110 years after Pope Pius X met Herzl and rejected the idea of a Jewish state.

The pontiff’s “pilgrimage” could not dispel the historical fact that lies deep in the regional Arab memory that papacy was “still linked to the Crusades of the 11th through 13th centuries” when the successive popes’ only link to the Holy Land was a military one, according to the international editor of NPR.org, Greg Myre, on this May 24.

Of course this does not apply to Christianity. The indigenous oriental churches’ link to the land has never been interrupted while the Catholic Church was cut off from the region since the end of the Crusades until it came back with the European colonial domination since the nineteenth century.

No pope ever travelled to Jerusalem until [Paul VI](#) spent one day in the city, on January 4, 1964, when the holy sites were under the rule of the Arab Jordanians. John Paul visited thirty six years later and established a new papal tradition that has been followed by Pope Benedict, who visited in 2009, and now Pope Francis.

It doesn’t bode well with the Arabs and the Palestinians in particular that the new papal tradition is building on the background of recognizing Israel, which is an occupying power and still without a constitutional demarcated borders, as a fait accompli that the Palestinian people should recognize as well.

Nicola Nasser is a veteran Arab journalist based in Birzeit, West Bank of the Israeli-occupied Palestinian territories. An edited version of this article was first published by the Middle East Eye. nassernicola@gmail.com

The original source of this article is Global Research
Copyright © [Nicola Nasser](#), Global Research, 2014

[Comment on Global Research Articles on our Facebook page](#)

[Become a Member of Global Research](#)

Articles by: [Nicola Nasser](#)

Disclaimer: The contents of this article are of sole responsibility of the author(s). The Centre for Research on Globalization will not be responsible for any inaccurate or incorrect statement in this article. The Centre of Research on Globalization grants permission to cross-post Global Research articles on community internet sites as long the source and copyright are acknowledged together with a hyperlink to the original Global Research article. For publication of Global Research articles in print or other forms including commercial internet sites, contact: publications@globalresearch.ca

www.globalresearch.ca contains copyrighted material the use of which has not always been specifically authorized by the copyright owner. We are making such material available to our readers under the provisions of "fair use" in an effort to advance a better understanding of political, economic and social issues. The material on this site is distributed without profit to those who have expressed a prior interest in receiving it for research and educational purposes. If you wish to use copyrighted material for purposes other than "fair use" you must request permission from the copyright owner.

For media inquiries: publications@globalresearch.ca