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VATICAN-ISRAELI RELATIONS AFFECTED BY ISLAMIC FANATICS

(An International Relations Department Background Analysis)

By Marc H. Tanenbaum

(Rabbi Tanenbaum, director of international relations of the American Jewish Committee, is an authority on Vatican-Jewish relations. He was the only rabbi present at Vatican Council II, and has just returned from a mission to Israel, Italy, and the Vatican where he participated in an audience with Pope John Paul II.)

AMERICAN JEWISH

Expectations that Pope John Paul II will visit Israel or that formal diplomatic relations will be established between the Holy See and Israel are not in the cards. Not in the near future.

I have come to that sobering conclusion after a recent three-week mission to Israel, Italy, and the Vatican. I was part of a leadership mission of the American Jewish Committee that met with Israeli Prime Minister Shimon Peres and other foreign ministry officials; Italian Foreign Minister Giulio Andreotti and Defense Minister Giovanni Spadolini; U.S. Ambassador to Italy, Maxwell Rabb; and, finally, Pope John Paul II and a number of Vatican officials.

Extended conversations on the complex Middle East situation with these key actors in the Mediterranean world yielded some fresh insights:

First, contrary to public perceptions, the Vatican maintains de facto recognition of the State of Israel. When Israel's Prime Minister Shimon Peres met with the Pope in February he was given red carpet treatment, the full protocol accorded a head of state. That has been true of the diplomatic visits made to the Vatican earlier by such Israeli governmental leaders as Foreign Minister Yitzhak Shamir, the late Golda Meir and Moshe Dayan, Abba Eban, among others.

On a day-to-day basis, the Israeli Embassy in Rome is in regular communication with the Vatican Secretariat of State, and other Curial officials. On a cultural level, hundreds of Catholic priests and nuns -- with Vatican approval -- study regularly in Israel.

Second, Pope John Paul II, I am persuaded, is personally friendly toward Israel and acknowledges her right to exist as a sovereign nation. In a little-noticed Apostolic Letter issued by this Pope last Easter, entitled, Redemptionis Anno, he wrote the following about Israel and Jerusalem.

"For the Jewish people who live in the State of Israel, and who preserve in that land such precious testimonies to their history and their faith, we must ask for the desired security and the due tranquility that is the prerogative of every nation and condition of life and of progress for every society...

"Jews ardently love her (Jerusalem), and in every age venerate her memory, abundant as she is in many remains and monuments from the time of David who chose her as the capital (my underlining), and of Solomon who built the Temple there. Therefore, they turn their minds to her daily, one may say, and point to her as the sign of their nation."

Those are the most forthcoming acknowledgments of the centrality of Israel and of Jerusalem in Jewish consciousness made by any Pope in recent memory.

Third, when our AJC delegation asked of Vatican Secretary of State authorities why the Holy See does not establish de jure diplomatic relations with Israel, we were given at first the usual explanations. "It is not the policy of the Holy See to enter into diplomatic relations with a nation when it is in a state of belligerency with its neighbors, or when its borders are not established by international agreements. That is why the Holy See does not maintain diplomatic relations with Jordan as well," we were told.

But as the conversation continued, it became clear that that was the given reason, not the real reason. After all, the Vatican has diplomatic ties with some 112 countries, many of which are involved in belligerency, civil wars and border disputes -- Ethiopia, Sudan, Angola, Nicaragua, among others. And those relations are sustained even though the Vatican does not approve of many of their ideological policies.

The real reason, it seems quite clear, is that the Vatican profoundly fears that should she move from de facto recognition to establishing full diplomatic de jure recognition of Israel that Arab-Muslim fanatics in the Middle East and in Africa will launch a wave of reprisals against millions of Arab Christians and African Christians in predominantly Islamic countries. Over and again, Vatican authorities kept referring to the precarious plight of Catholics in Lebanon who suffer daily violence at the hands of fanatic Shiite and Sunni Muslims, and the virtual impotence of the Vatican in helping to protect them. (Christian groups have reciprocated violently as well.)

The Holy See officials also described in painful detail for us the horror stories of more than a half million Christians who were killed in the south of the Sudan by the northern Arab Muslims, and the half million Christians killed by the Muslim leader Idi Amin when he was president of Uganda.

So great is this preoccupation over the threat of Islamic fanaticism to the security of Christians that Pope John Paul II in a recent address to the diplomatic corps accredited to the Holy See berated those Muslim countries whose citizens have come to Europe in the millions and have been assured religious liberty while Muslim countries have denied those same human rights to Christians living in their midst.

Thus, it is far more the fear of Muslim reprisals than antipathy toward Israel that has thus far precluded de jure diplomatic ties between the Holy See and Israel. There are, of course, contested issues between the Holy See and Israel -- the status of Jerusalem, Palestinian self-determination, and holy sites. But those are negotiable issues whereas fear of Islamic reprisals are not subject to rational compromises.

Finally, these conversations have convinced me that Italian foreign policy plays a far greater influence in Vatican affairs than is generally recognized. In recent years, Italy has been trying urgently to emerge as one of "the big five" European powers on the international scene.

As the one truly Mediterranean nation in the European Community, Italy is now heavily engaged in commercial and trade relations with Arab countries. Italy is dependent for 85 percent of her oil supplies on Arab nations. The present Italian government is jockeying to win nearly \$1 billion worth of contracts from Egypt for building that country's first nuclear power station and the second stage of Cairo's metro system. And some 20,000 Italian workers are now serving in Libya. Libya's Central Bank owns 17% of Fiat, and Italy exports large amounts of arms to Arab countries, including Libya despite her role in exporting terrorism.

Italy has a troubled economy -- continuing high inflation (12-13%), high unemployment (10%), and a massive state budget deficit on the order of 17% of the country's gross domestic product. (The U.S. federal budget deficit amounts to about 4% of the GDP.)

That economic pressure has led the Italian government to become increasingly dependent on Arab nations for economic relief. Those obdurate survival needs have influenced a pro-Arab, pro-PLO tilt in Italian foreign policy far more than some ideological vision.

At the same time, Italy has been friendly toward Israel. Prime Minister Andreotti told us, "One point is firm for us -- Israel's right to security and sovereign existence. Our Parliament is unanimous on that. There was never any doubt on this issue." In December 1983, Israel and Italy signed a broad agreement covering economic, agricultural, scientific, technological and cultural relations.

Italy is thus engaged in a geopolitical trapeze act in the Middle East, being supportive of Israel while cultivating her economic and political ties with the Arab world whom she seeks to influence to adopt a moderate stance leading toward peaceful negotiations between Israel, the Palestinians, and other Arabs.

Beneath the theological rhetoric, that is essentially the same stance adopted by the Holy See. While the Holy See clearly has universal interests, its daily existence is profoundly affected by its relationship with the Italian government and Italian domestic politics. On February 18th, the Vatican and the Italian government signed a new concordat that stipulates that Roman Catholicism will no longer be the state religion and that Rome's status as "a sacred city" is ended.

The 14-article concordat also establishes a mixed church-state commission which has been given six months to draw up regulations governing the controversial question of taxation of religious institutions of Italy. The Vatican bank, known as the IOR (Istituto per le Opere di Religione) was deeply implicated in a far-reaching scandal that involved loans of about \$1.3 billion to shadow companies directly or indirectly owned by the IOR. Those loans are believed to have caused the bankruptcy of Banco Ambrosiano, Italy's largest private banking institution, and the mysterious death of its president, Roberto Calvi.

A separate Vatican-Italian commission has been set up to sort out the Vatican bank's role in the collapse of the Banco Ambrosiano more than two years ago. In the meantime, the Vatican has denied responsibility in the crash but reportedly has agreed to pay some \$250 million towards a general settlement with the more than 100 creditors of the Ambrosiano bank group.

Those weighty, intricate ties between the Holy See and the Italian government have inevitably sensitized Vatican policy makers to the domestic and foreign policy directions of the Italian government. Reinforcing that alignment is the fact that Italy serves from January to June 1985 as president of the European Economic Community. Italy's political stance toward Israel and the Middle East is in fact shared by most of the ten-member nations of the EEC who are also engaged in a trapeze act of seeking to reconcile Israel, the Palestinians and the surrounding Arab nations.

Thus by aligning itself with Italian foreign policy, the Holy See also identifies itself with the main lines of the European Community's foreign policies.

Given those realities, it is clear that Pope John Paul II, notwithstanding his personal sympathies toward Israel and the Jewish People, will not shortly be visiting the Jewish State, nor will de jure diplomatic relations be established in the near future between the Holy See and Israel. But I will go out on a limb and predict that once peace is established between Israel, the Palestinians and Jordan, the Holy See will change its course and will move quickly to make de jure what is now de facto.

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2/19/85
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