Series C: Interreligious Activities. 1952-1992
Box 50, Folder 1, Vatican Council II - Arabs, 1964.
MEMORANDUM

To: Foreign Affairs Department
From: Paris Office
Subj: Reaction in the Middle East to the Ecumenical Council Vote on Section IV of the Decree "Catholic Attitudes toward Non-Christians"

The French press has carried extensive reports in the last few days of unfavorable reaction in the Middle East to the Ecumenical Council vote on Section IV, concerning Jews, of the decree "Catholic Attitudes toward Non-Christians."

We translate below two articles which appeared in Le Figaro of November 27 describing this reaction.

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Beirut - "It is a dagger stroke against the unity of Christian communities living in the Holy Land." This position taken by the Christians of Bethlehem sparked the explosion. Note: Following protests in Bethlehem against the Council action, the Jordan government has announced that access to the Holy places will be forbidden to those who vote for section IV of the Church document. The lifting of the accusation of deicide against the Jews cannot easily be accepted by people of the Middle East who, from an early age, are accustomed to consider that Christ was indeed assassinated by the Jewish people. It is only normal, therefore, that Christian communities of the Middle East be the first to protest the decision taken at the Vatican.

But the Middle East politics are often dangerously mixed with minority problems and religious disputes. And so Jordanian authorities, followed by those of the "World Islamic Union" of Saudi Arabia, seized on the pretext to condemn an attitude of the Vatican which, in their view, must lead to recognition of the state of Israel. In fact, the problem of deicide does not exist for Islam since Moslems, take the view that the "prophet" Jesus did not die on the cross, God having recalled him before the Passion and an unknown person having been crucified in his place at Golgotha. Islam would...
be in an unfavorable position, therefore, to rise up against the rehabilitation of the Jewish people for a crime that it did not commit. On the other hand, on the political side -- and this is the most serious part of the problem -- the authorities in the Arab world believe that the Vatican's decision, favorable to Jews, strengthens Israel at their expense.

For quite some time the Christian communities of the Middle East have been warning the Vatican about the consequences of any rapprochement of the Catholic Church with Jews. All the Church Patriarchs living in the Holy Land were opposed to the Council adoption of the schema on non-Christian religions.

Today they seek to calm attitudes by stressing that the decision is not definitive. Thus, for example, the Greek Patriarch Marinos IV has just issued a clarification pointing out that in any event the final adoption of the schema cannot occur for another year. By then he, like many other responsible Christians, hopes to calm the tempest by explaining the true intentions of the Church.

But in the present state of affairs much time and good will will be needed to bring back the language of reason and of comprehension. It is certain that the Eastern Churches are deeply uneasy following the Council vote, an unease all the greater because the opening of the Council raised great hopes among the Eastern Churches. Time and reason will perhaps prevent the occurrence of any incidents in Jordan or at the Holy places. The Jordanian government, which showed a great spirit of tolerance when receiving Paul VI this year, will doubtless try to avoid the worst. Nonetheless, the hope and benefit manifest on the morrow of the Pope's pilgrimage to the Holy Land are temporarily compromised. The Eastern Churches are on the defensive.

Jordon's neighbors applaud her decision.

In Syria, which has always been in the van of the struggle against Israel, the newspaper Sauram declares that Zionism "has made the Council commit a mortal sin"; and Al Baas asserts that "Judas lives on", adding, "Once again they have sold Christ for a few dollars."

In Lebanon the reaction is more moderate. The Moslem newspaper Al-Masa writes: "The Council's decision will not affect the solid ties uniting Moslems and Christians, but will serve as a point of departure for a new phase in relations between Moslems and the Vatican."

In Middle Eastern countries the attitude of different Christian communities is not the same everywhere.

In Syria, the Evangelical Episcopal community of Amman takes the position that the most dangerous part of the Council's declaration is that which asserts that "Jesus was Jewish" and which invites Christian Arabs to "separate themselves from the Church of the West." (sic).
In Egypt the Copt Orthodox Patriarch Msgr. Kyrillos is striving to call a general Orthodox conference which would reply to the Vatican.

The only discordant voice among the Moslems is that of the four cadis (judges) of Jerusalem (in Israel): the accusation of decadence, they point out, is considered as a "defamation" by the Koran.

The position of Catholic communities of the oriental rite is notably different. Maximos IV, the Greek Catholic Patriarch of Antioch, had read in all Churches of his Patriarchy -- that is to say Lebanon, Syria, Palestine and Egypt -- a clarification in which, after having noted that the Council decision "is not yet definitive" (it has not yet been ratified by the Pope and must be voted anew at the next session) he asserted that "it does not make the Jews innocent of the blood of Christ" (it was the Jews who brought Jesus before Pilate so that He might be crucified but they did not believe He was God), "and only seeks to lead the world to treat all men, Jews included, with benevolence and without any discrimination of race or religion."

This declaration shows the embarrassment of Arab Catholic communities of the Eastern rite, submerged among Arab and Moslem masses who are ever ready to blame up and accuse them of treason. The Patriarch Maximos has 400,000 faithful in the world, including European and American countries, but only 19,200 in Jordan itself.

Moreover, Arab Catholics are Arabs and want this to be known: "We Christians in these countries, we are Arabs; we are Arabs well before the Moslems conquest and well before the birth of Islam" proclaimed Maximos in 1957 in a resounding speech.

By the very fact of belonging to Arabism they are generally hostile to Israel, and one should not be astonished if some of them strive to demonstrate to the Council Fathers in spectacular fashion their attachment to what is called here "the Arab Fatherland."

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cc: Rabbi Marc Tanenbaum
December 18, 1963

Memorandum

To: Foreign Affairs Department

From: Paris Office

Subj: Initial Arab Press Reaction to Draft Proposal
Concerning Jews Presented at Ecumenical Council

Enclosed please find a memo on initial Arab press reaction to the
draft proposal concerning Jews presented at the Ecumenical Council.

We should like to emphasize that this is an initial report, and
does not cover the period toward the end of November when the Arabs
made their heaviest attacks upon the Council action. We, therefore,
recommend that you do not use this report until such time as we have the
follow-up to it, going into the latter half of November and early Dec­
ember. We are making arrangements, of course, to procure this follow­
up study.

Enc.
Memorandum

To: Foreign Affairs Department

From: Paris Office

Subj: Initial Arab Press Reaction to Draft Proposal Concerning Jews Presented at Ecumenical Council

The initial Arab press reaction to Cardinal Bea’s presentation to the Ecumenical Council of the draft decree concerning Jews was irregular and less vigorous in opposition than one might have expected, shows a survey of the Arab press made here for the AJC and covering the period November 8th to 20th. This is prior, it will be noted, to the declaration by the Arab League in which it expressed its “hope that measures will be taken so that the draft on relations between the Catholic Church and Jews will be withdrawn, and not included on the agenda of the Council.” This Arab League declaration also asserted that Zionism was exploiting the Ecumenical Council draft for its propaganda. News about this declaration being distributed just as the Council was about to close, on December 4, it is obviously not covered in our press survey of initial Arab press reactions.

The survey was made by reading two or three of the major newspapers of each of the Arab countries. The choice of papers was the same as that made by the French government documentation office here, for following press in the Middle East.

It will be remembered that in preparation for presentation to the Ecumenical Council of the draft decree concerning Jews a special press communique was prepared by Vatican sources, in Arabic, and distributed to Arab press representatives and agencies the morning of the presentation of the draft. This communique emphasized that the matter was not a political one but strictly of religious and spiritual nature. Given the original ragged reaction in opposition...
of the Arab press, this communique may have had some initial effect.

According to the survey, in Egypt the major papers, primarily pre-occupied at the time with reporting on the attitude of the United States Congress to aid to Egypt, gave relatively minor attention to the Ecumenical Council action.

The newspaper Al Ahram of November 9 published news on the second page in its foreign affairs section under the quite neutral title "A memorandum for bettering relations between Jews and Christians is distributed to 2,000 religious leaders." The story that followed was compiled from various press agency sources and was essentially the communique given out by the Vatican.

On the 11th, the same paper printed correctly and without commenting a dispatch from Paris asserting that Dr. Nahum Goldman, president of the International Zionist Organization had warmly welcomed the Vatican memorandum. The headline, however, read: "World Zionism Warmly Welcomes Vatican Memorandum."

On the 12th, from "Occupied Jerusalem," the paper published the declaration of Israeli Minister Warhaftig. On the 20th, and following the intervention of Cardinal Bea at the Council, Al Ahram's headline on the second page declared: "An Italian (sic) Cardinal Defends the Memorandum on Jews Before the Council." This again was a fair summary quoting Cardinal Bea accurately: his declaration with regard to Nazism and that John XXIII had ordered the question taken up as a purely religious question and had approved the draft decree. It also cited Cardinal Bea as saying that the draft "in no way concerns any national or political question or implies recognition of Israel by the Vatican."

The story concluded that certain Middle East religious leaders were "opposed to examination of the Jewish question within the schema of Christian Unity, while also pointing out that this would embarrass Christian minorities in the Arab world."

What might be considered the first major propaganda attack in Egypt on the Ecumenical Council action came from the semi-official government newspaper Al Gumsrnya ten days after the draft was presented on November 18. On page three, there was a feature article entitled "World Zionism Brings Pressure to bear on the Vatican to deform the Gospel and recognize Israel. Religious Leaders Denounce the Zionist Plot."

A lengthy article signed by Michel Guirgis opened with the following:

"World Zionism is putting into Execution the Zionist Protocol of Domination by undertaking steps to disfigure Religions..." It went on briefly to describe "Israeli Attacks on the Holy Places and Men of Religion in Jerusalem" -- which is apparently its version of the attacks of the religious fanatics in Israel on the non-Jewish schools there -- and says that this brought the severe protest of French, British and Finnish diplomats. Although the Israeli President had promised punishment, the people involved have been released, according to Al Gumsrnya.
"The purpose of this aggression is to bring pressure on the Vatican to recognize Israel as a nation!" Guirguis goes on. He then recounts how Israeli Minister Warhaftig and "The Council of the Union of Jewish Organizations in Florida" had warmly welcomed the presentation of the draft decree on Jews.

"When Maximus, the Patriarch of Roman Catholics at Jerusalem, learned about this plot he sent a memorandum to Pope Paul VI protesting against the manoeuvres being attempted to bring about closer ties with Jews, who have tortured, dispossessed and killed Palestinian Arabs, and outlining all the oppression committed against Palestinian groups by Israel."

Guirguis then describes how he sought the opinions of the different religious leaders in the United Arab Republic (that is, Egypt). The Vicar-General of the Orthodox Copt Patriarchy declared, according to Guirguis: "The attempt to declare Jews innocent of the crucifixion of the Messiah is doomed to defeat; to contest sacred texts of 20 centuries duration is frivolous...The Council may take this decision to give pleasure to Jews but no force can change a single line of the sacred Book." He then implied that there might be a connection between the halting of American assistance and political influences for deformation of the sacred texts.

From the Vicar of Anglican Copts, Dr. Ibrahim Said, Guirguis got a declaration copiously citing Biblical texts to try and prove that Jews are the crucifiers of Christ. "It seems to me that international Zionism is carefully executing the Zionist protocol for world hegemony...but in any case it is universally detested...."

From Father Nouh Shaba Hanna, Patriarchal Vicar of Orthodox Syrians, Guirguis says he acquired the following: "The manoeuvre of the Council is a serious one, and I was very much affected especially because the draft was presented by a great religious chief. In this fashion the Vatican denies what has been said by the Gospels...Who has influenced the Council with regard to this draft? Can it be financial considerations? Or is it Zionist gold, which inundated the American Congress, at the time it took this sinister decision..."

Insofar as other Arab countries are concerned; The Jordanian press contented itself with reporting press agency dispatches without any comment.

The Sudan papers made absolutely no mention of the event.

The Syria Baath party was the quickest of all to react in unfavorable fashion, writing on November 10 in the party newspaper Al Baath:

"What does the rapprochement between the Vatican and Israel hide?"
Qualified Syrian circles are preoccupied by press news about the evolution of relations between the Vatican and Israel. They are particularly interested in news just sent out on behalf of the Vatican and the Ecumenical Council concerning the suppression of the malediction that fell upon the Jews following the persecution of Jesus. Syrian circles observe that such attempts may be exploited by Jews who will use them as an argument to influence the feeling of Christians throughout the world.

Reaction in Lebanon was a mixed one. The Beirut paper Al Hayat (an independent paper of the Chiite Moslems) featured on its front page a story that "Latinis in Jerusalem Oppose any Rapprochement with Jews," citing an Arab press agency story from Amman. This declared that Msgr. Neema al-Simaan, of the Latin Patriarchy, had declared that the Latin Patriarch of Jerusalem had sent Pope Paul VI a memorandum asking that there should be no rapprochement with Jews because of the aid that they give to Israel "which continues its oppression and aggression against Arabs..." This oppression, al-Simaan went on, touches not only Palestinian Arabs but also Catholics and other Christians. He condemned the draft distributed to the Council as containing ambiguous phraseology "that hides a political manoeuvre;" the Monsignor declaring that "the Jews who live today in Washington have not crucified the Messiah with their hands but this in no wise changes reality as it is to be found in the Gospels."

Continuing to pay attention to the subject, the same newspaper published the text of the Secretariat for Christian Unity on November 13; and on the 14th it gave an Arab press agency report that the Jordanian Ambassador to Rome had cabled his government that the proposal presented to the Council was purely religious and had no political significance. On the 19th and 20th, it gave reports of what happened at the Council, mentioning both views in favor of and opposed to the draft, without any comment; and giving the Reuter's dispatch on Cardinal Bea's speech.

The pro-Nasser Beirut newspaper Al Syasa also gave the same straight agency account that day.

A curiously favorable view came from the editorial writer of the Lebanese paper L'Orient. The writer, M. Rene Aggiouri, denounced first those Arab commentators who had seized upon the text to express concern about Christianity's attitude toward Jews. Then he blasted the Zionist circles who sought to take advantage of the decree immediately, according to him. But, in fact, he continued, "the proposed text is in the sense of traditional positions of Islam, which has not known the kind of religious opposition to Judaism that Christianity has...What have we
always maintained as regards Zionism and the creation of Israel? That Jewish communities have always lived in peace among the Arabs; that pogroms are strictly an European phenomenon; that European states should stop the emigration of Jews toward occupied Palestine.

"All Zionist attempts at justification of the Israeli state are based upon exploitation of the feeling that Jews cannot adapt into non-Jewish societies.

"And we know how eminent representatives of Jewish communities who are perfectly assimilated in the societies where they live are opposed to Zionism because they consider its nationalist attitudes as anachronistic. This is the case with the American Congress (sic) of Judaism (the writer obviously means the American Council for Judaism) whose leaders have often been welcomed in Arab capitals.

"To the degree where change in the teaching of the Church can destroy old prejudices and take away a major argument of militant Zionism in Europe, Arab states ought to rejoice," the editorial of L'Orient concludes.
"JEWISH CHAPTER" - ARABS KEEP UP PRESSURE


(JCNS) Cardinal Bea's Secretariat for the Promotion of Christian Unity is expected to complete its analysis of the suggestions for modification of the Declaration on non-Christians, including "the Jewish chapter," by the end of February.

According to reliable sources, the Secretariat's experts have almost finished their revision of the declaration on the basis of the suggestions submitted by members of the Ecumenical Council, and the final draft will be approved early in March.

The Vatican correspondent of the Rome news-magazine, "Il Punto", says that Arab diplomatic circles do not exclude a visit to the Vatican by President Nasser during his expected trip to Germany in the spring. The correspondent says that secret consultations are taking place regarding the visit, commenting: "The intention of Nasser is supposedly that of illustrating to the Pope the viewpoint of his Government on the Ecumenical Council's Declaration on the Jews."

The same correspondent reports that secret conversations are also under way between the Vatican Secretariat of State and the Lebanese Government regarding a visit by President Helou to the Pope towards the end of January or early February.

M. Helou, according to "Il Punto," has been charged by the Arab League with the task of expressing in official form the opposition of Arab leaders to the Jewish document. "In circles close to the Holy See it is underlined that M. Helou has already discussed the issue with the Pope during their encounter at Beirut airport (when the Pope was "en route" to India), but that he is insisting (on this further meeting) in order to give the intervention an official character."