

May 15, 2009

Netanyahu Asks Pope to Condemn Iran

By RACHEL DONADIO

NAZARETH, [Israel](#) — [Pope Benedict XVI](#) became further entangled in Middle East politics on Thursday when the Israeli prime minister, [Benjamin Netanyahu](#), urged him to denounce [Iran](#).

A day after visiting a [Palestinian](#) refugee camp and calling for the creation of a Palestinian state as a solution to the conflict with Israel, Benedict met with Mr. Netanyahu, whose hawkish Likud government has not endorsed that policy.

Mr. Netanyahu used the occasion to raise what has become a central issue to his government. "I asked him as a moral figure to make his voice heard loudly and continuously against the declarations coming from Iran about their intentions to destroy the state of Israel," Mr. Netanyahu told Israeli television after meeting Benedict. (In the past, Iran's president, [Mahmoud Ahmadinejad](#), has called for Israel's destruction, although on at least one occasion last year, he used somewhat less severe language, saying Israel would collapse.)

"It cannot be that at the start of the 21st century, a state arises that says it intends to destroy the Jewish state and that a very strong and aggressive voice isn't heard condemning this phenomenon," Mr. Netanyahu added.

The [Vatican](#) has full diplomatic ties with Iran.

Benedict has not directly spoken about Iranian statements on Israel, but the Vatican spokesman, the Rev. Federico Lombardi, has. On Thursday, Father Lombardi said that he had, on several occasions, criticized comments attacking Israel and denying the Holocaust. "We have made objections in the past," he said.

Since arriving in Israel on Monday as "a pilgrim of peace," the pope has sought to promote dialogue among Christians, Jews and Muslims. But he has also treaded into some of the most contentious issues in the region.

In a closed 15-minute meeting in Nazareth, the northern Israeli city where tradition says Jesus lived, the pope and Mr. Netanyahu discussed "how to advance the terms of the peace process," Father Lombardi said.

Mr. Netanyahu said he and the pope had discussed "the historic process of reconciliation between Christianity and Judaism."

Father Lombardi said they had also discussed the continuing negotiations between the Vatican and the State of Israel over the Roman Catholic Church's legal and taxation status in Israel.

The Holy See and Israel have yet to sign a formal agreement on those issues, although they [established full diplomatic ties](#) in 1994.

Earlier Thursday, an estimated 40,000 pilgrims flocked to Nazareth to hear [Benedict celebrate an open-air Mass](#) in a stadium on Mount Precipice in the hills that stretch toward the Sea of Galilee.

Muslims far outnumber Christians in Nazareth's large Arab-Israeli population. The two groups have clashed over a plan, eventually rejected, to construct a mosque near the Basilica of the Annunciation, built on the site where the Archangel Gabriel is believed to have announced to Mary that she was to give birth to Jesus. Benedict urged "people of good will in both communities to repair the damage that has been done."

Throughout his visit to Jordan and Israel, Benedict has been calling attention to the plight of [Christians](#) in the region, whose numbers have been declining.

At the Mass, Archbishop Elias Chacour of the Melkite Greek Catholic Church, called for the pope's "moral and spiritual support" in the face of the dwindling number of Christians in the Middle East. "The exodus of Christians fills us with anguish and presents a far from encouraging future," he said in Arabic.

At an interfaith meeting in Nazareth, Benedict, 82, smiled as he held hands with Christian, Jewish and Muslim leaders while a rabbi sang, "Shalom, salaam, Lord grant us peace."

At an evening service in the Basilica of the Annunciation, the pope [greeted Hebrew-speaking Christians](#), calling them "a reminder to us of the Jewish roots of our faith."

The mayor of Nazareth, Ramiz Jaraisy, said he hoped the pope's visit would encourage Christian tourism to the Galilee area. "He is Jesus of Nazareth. Not some other town," Mr. Jaraisy said.

Isabel Kershner contributed reporting from Jerusalem.

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