

Features

Author says politics determine Vatican's Mideast policy

By Rob Cullivan

Pope John Paul II could help defuse rising tensions among Jerusalem's Christians, Jews and Moslems with a Christmas visit to the city, according to a researcher/writer for the Catholic Near East Welfare Association.

"I don't think the pope's life is more valuable than Christ's," said George E. Irani, referring to the possibility of violence during such a papal visit. "He's visited the whole world, but not the Middle East."

Since the Palestinian uprising in the occupied territories began, friction between Israel's Jewish and Arab Christian and Moslem communities has increased immensely, according to Irani, who spoke on the Vatican's foreign policy in the Middle East, at St. John Fisher College's Community Education Center, Friday night, Nov. 11.

The Vatican does not recognize Israel diplomatically, a stance that has been questioned by Jewish leaders. But Irani, author of "The Papacy and the Middle East: The Role of the Holy See in the Arab-Israeli Conflict, 1962-1984," believes the Vatican's position is soundly based.

Politics, not religion, causes the Holy See to withhold its ambassador from Tel Aviv, he explained, noting the Vatican's major concerns regarding Israel are the country's lack of internationally-recognized borders, its control of Jerusalem, and the Israeli invasion of southern Lebanon.

The Vatican never recognizes a nation whose borders have not been settled, according to Irani. The unresolved status of the occupied Gaza strip and the West Bank — a part of Jordan before Israel and its Arab neighbors fought the Six Day War in 1967 — also explains why the Vatican doesn't recognize Jordan.

Since the 1967 war, the Vatican has viewed the Palestinians who live in the occupied territories as a national people, rather than as refugees. The Holy See favors the creation of an independent Palestinian state, Irani said, but stipulates that such a state would have to recognize Israel's right to exist. "I doubt the pope would (recognize Israel) as long as there is no solution to the Palestinian problem," he concluded.

The Holy See is particularly interested in the Palestinian plight because eight to 10 percent of Palestinians are Christian, Irani noted. The U.S. order of the Christian Brothers operates Bethlehem University in the West Bank, and the Catholic Near East Welfare Association, overseen by New York City's Cardinal John J. O'Connor, funds educational and humanitarian projects in the Middle East.

In a move designed to demonstrate that the Vatican supports a full Palestinian role in the Church, the pope last year named a Palestinian to be Jerusalem's Catholic patriarch for the first time in nearly 1,000 years. Irani pointed out that previous patriarchs had been Europeans.

Jerusalem's status also concerns the Holy See. Before the 1967 war, when Jerusalem was divided between Israel and Jordan, the Vatican wanted the city to be ruled internationally because it is sacred to Judaism, Christianity and Islam. Since 1967, the Holy See has said it would accept Israeli rule of Jerusalem if the city were governed by an international committee that ensured equal rights for all its inhabitants.

Currently, Palestinians do not enjoy all the rights of Israelis, Irani said.

Despite the tensions between Israel and the Vatican, the pope has a special desk at the Israeli embassy in Rome. The Vatican also sends an apostolic delegate to Jerusalem, although he is a pastoral servant of the local church and not a diplomat.

Even if Israel were to meet the Vatican's conditions for full diplomatic relations, Rome would not initiate the recognition process, Irani remarked. And while Israeli leaders would welcome the pope's recognition of Israel as a sign of improved Christian/Jewish relations after centuries of anti-Semitism, they are not likely to meet Rome's condition of conceding territory to the Palestinians in exchange for a papal ambassador.

The recent triumph of Israel's religious right in that country's elections further ensures the Holy See and Tel Aviv will not exchange ambassadors anytime soon, Irani said. He speculated that some ultra-orthodox Jews would oppose such recognition from a Christian leader. "After 2,000 years of Christian persecution, they don't want Christians (in Israel)," he said. "Missionaries are a sensitive issue."

Christian/Jewish relations worldwide have also been strained by what Irani acknowledged to be Vatican diplomatic blunders in recent years. Pope John Paul II's meeting last year with Austria's president, Kurt Waldheim, was one such instance that could have been better handled.

Waldheim has been accused of lying about his involvement in Nazi crimes during World War II, yet the pope made no mention of the controversy during their visit. Jewish and Christian leaders — including some Catholics — denounced the meeting, but the Vatican had its reasons, according to Irani.

"Waldheim is a head of state, and Austria is a Catholic state," he said. "It would have been considered a slight if there had been no visit. On the other hand, American Jewish leaders could have been consulted beforehand."

An earlier papal visit with Yasser Arafat enraged Israel and its American supporters. Arafat, leader of the Palestinian Liberation Organization, met Pope John Paul II in September, 1982. Once again, despite the controversy, the pope felt justified in meeting a controversial leader. "Arafat represents the majority of his people," Irani said. "They listen to him." Following the meeting with Arafat, however, the pontiff denounced terrorism while recognizing the Palestinians' right to self-determination.

Catholics throughout the world remain divided on such issues, and are likewise split over support for Israel — a factor Irani believes the Holy See must take into account when formulating foreign policy.

When Cardinal O'Connor visited the Holy Land in June, 1986, for instance, he continually asserted the Palestinians' right to a homeland. On the other hand, many Lebanese Christians regard Palestinians as their enemies because of the civil war, Irani said.

Israeli weapons and soldiers have joined Syrian, Iranian, and Palestinian forces to wreak havoc in Lebanon. The Vatican opposed Israel's invasion of southern Lebanon in the summer of 1982, Irani said, considering it unwarranted.

Endowment to help Kenyan priests

Several men from the east African nation of Kenya want to become Catholic priests, but the nation's Church lacks the resources to train them. The U.S. Church, on the other hand, has ample facilities, but fewer and fewer native sons to prepare for the priesthood.

Jack O'Leary wants to rectify this imbalance by creating an endowment fund for Kenyan candidates for the priesthood at St. John Fisher College in Rochester. The Rochester businessman, a self-described "friend of the college," is working along with Peter Carpino, Fisher's vice president for development, and Sister Alice Cooney, pastoral assistant at St. Catherine of Siena Church in Mendon, to solicit donors to permanently endow a scholarship fund and a ministry fund.

The scholarship fund would pay for two years of study for one priest. Proceeds from the pastoral ministry fund would go to Fisher graduates for use in their home parishes, with each request for aid being approved by the Kenya Bishops' Conference. Two Kenyans are currently studying at Fisher, funded by a private donor.

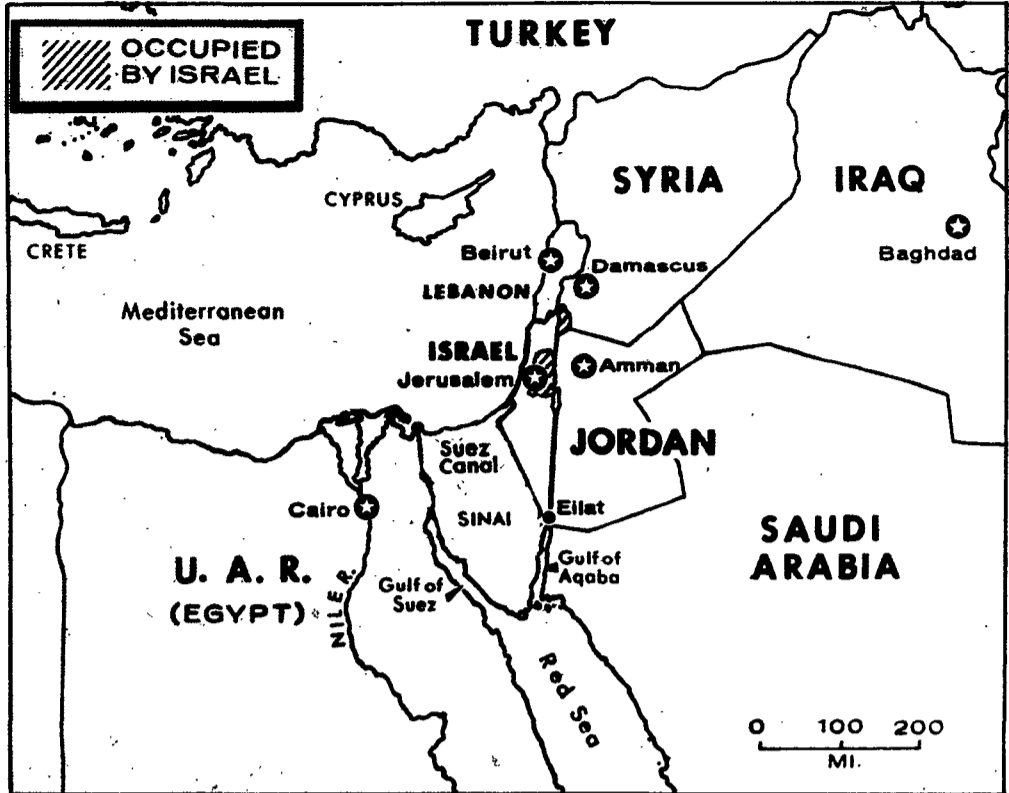
From the mid-1960s until 1986, the college footed the bill for more than a dozen students from Kenya, four of whom went on to become

diocesan bishops in their native land. Rising tuition costs and unsuccessful efforts to secure government and corporate grants led the college to cease funding the Kenyans' education.

So far the endowment drive has garnered one \$25,000 donation, and a few smaller gifts, O'Leary said. A \$125,000 endowment would produce enough income to pay for the education of one Kenyan. Donors to the pastoral ministry fund are being asked to give a minimum of \$1,000. Ministry gifts would go towards purchasing such items as jeeps for use in traveling among Kenya's widespread parishes.

The college may ask parishes for donations to the endowment, O'Leary said. Some Kenyans have served at parishes near Fisher, and they have created a favorable impression, he commented.

Just as the Kenyans have impressed their American supporters through their adaptability and caring, so can U.S. Catholics impress their African counterparts by funding the endowment. "The U.S. needs ambassadors of goodwill in Africa," O'Leary said. "It's a chance for the individual to make a significant difference."



Israel's occupied territories continue to concern the Vatican, which refuses to recognize Israel as long as the Palestinians remain without a nation.

In an interview before the speech, Irani — who was born and raised among Lebanon's one-and-a-half million Catholics, and who covered the country's civil strife for Italian TV in the mid-70s — remarked that the Christian/Moslem civil war has been "an embarrassment for the Vatican" because Lebanon was once considered a model of religious co-existence. Some Lebanese Catholics think "the Vatican is living in a dream world" regarding the country's divided condition, he said.

Later, in his speech, Irani said that Rome had sent diplomats to Lebanon at the civil

war's outset in 1975 hoping to mediate the conflict, but that these efforts failed. "When you don't have missiles, soldiers or navies, no one listens to you, unfortunately," he said.

Due to the region's numerous conflicts, Arab Christians are emigrating at an increasing rate. Unfortunately, Irani observed, it is those same Christians who could play a moderating role between the Christian Western world and the emergence of Islamic fundamentalism, which he likened to the Protestant Reformation. "You have to respect what the Moslems are going through," he concluded.

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