

# Pope in Israel calls for Palestinian homeland

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By VICTOR L. SIMPSON

TEL AVIV, Israel (AP) - Pope Benedict XVI called for the establishment of an independent Palestinian homeland immediately after he arrived in Israel Monday, a stance that could put him at odds with his hosts on a trip aimed at easing strains between the Vatican and Jews.

The pope also took on the delicate issue of the Holocaust, pledging to "honor the memory" of the 6 million Jewish victims of the Nazi genocide at the start of his five-day visit to Israel and the Palestinian territories.

Benedict urged Israelis and Palestinians to "explore every possible avenue" to resolve their differences in remarks at the airport after he landed.

"The hopes of countless men, women and children for a more secure and stable future depend on the outcome of negotiations for peace," he said. "In union with people of goodwill everywhere, I plead with all those responsible to explore every possible avenue in the search for a just resolution of the outstanding difficulties, so that both peoples may live in peace in a homeland of their own within secure and internationally recognized borders."

(AP) Faithful wave Jordanian and Vatican flags as they wait for the arrival of Pope Benedict XVI, at the...  
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While Benedict's support for a Palestinian homeland alongside Israel is widely shared by the international community, including the United States, it was noteworthy that he made the call in his first public appearance. Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, leader of the hard-line Likud Party, has pointedly refused to endorse the two-state solution since his election. But he is expected to come under pressure to do so when he travels to Washington next week.

The pope has tried to improve interfaith relations throughout his four-year papacy. But Benedict has had to tread carefully on his Middle East visit after coming under sharp criticism from both Muslims and Jews for past statements. He is hoping his weeklong trip to the Holy Land, which began with three days in neighboring Jordan, will improve interfaith ties.

Benedict angered many in the Muslim world three years ago when he quoted a Medieval text that characterized some of Islam's Prophet Muhammad's teachings as "evil and inhuman," particularly "his command to spread by the sword the faith. He later expressed regret that his comments offended Muslims.

The Vatican has also come under widespread criticism over the years for not doing enough to stop the genocide - a charge it rejects. And the German-born pope himself has faced questions for his involvement in the Hitler Youth corps during the war. Benedict says he was coerced. The pope also outraged Jews earlier this year when he revoked the excommunication of an ultraconservative bishop who denies the Holocaust.

Later Monday, Benedict is scheduled to lay a wreath at Israel's Yad Vashem Holocaust memorial.

"It is right and fitting that, during my stay in Israel, I will have the opportunity to honor the memory of the 6 million Jewish victims of the shoah," he said, using the Hebrew word for the Holocaust. He said he would "pray that humanity will never again witness a crime of such magnitude."

(AP) A nun waves a flag as a security officer, right, looks as faithful wait for the arrival of Pope...  
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Dignitaries and religious leaders greeted the pontiff at a red-carpet ceremony at the Tel Aviv airport. Yellow and white Vatican flags fluttered alongside blue and white Israeli banners as an honor guard played in the background.

The pope smiled as he walked along the carpet, flanked by Israeli President Shimon Peres on one side and Netanyahu on the other. Other political leaders, along with black-robed Christian clergymen and Muslim religious leaders, stood in line to shake his hand.

"Your visit here brings a blessed understanding between religions and spreads peace near and far. Historic Israel and the renewed Israel together welcome your arrival as paving the great road to peace," Peres said.

The pope plans to visit holy sites in both Israel and the Palestinian territories. He also will try to draw attention to the shrinking

Christian community in the Holy Land.

In Jordan, he said he had a "deep respect" for Islam and toured the country's largest mosque, where he did not pray but had a moment of reflection.

Before heading to Israel, Benedict urged Christians and Muslims at a farewell ceremony in Jordan to work for religious tolerance. He said his visit to a Jordan's largest mosque was one of the highlights so far of his first Middle East pilgrimage.

"I would like to encourage all Jordanians, whether Christian or Muslim to build on the firm foundations of religious tolerance that enable the members of different communities to live together in peace and mutual respect," Benedict said.

During his three days in Jordan, the pope said he hoped the Catholic Church could be a force for peace in the region.

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