Can the Pope Revive Palestinian-Israeli Diplomacy?

By Joshua Rickard and Michael C. Hudson

Key points

- Pope offers symbolic gesture to Palestinians
- Pope reaffirms his commitment to peace process
- Palestinian Christians living inside Israel have faced a dramatic increase in violent attacks by right-wing extremists
- Within Israel reaction to the Pope’s visit was mostly negative

It would take a miracle, say hardened Middle East observers, if the hundred year conflict over Palestine could finally be solved. Ever since it was carved out of the former Ottoman empire in World War I, the problem has eluded the best efforts of politicians and diplomats and instead spawned seven wars, two intifadas, thousands of casualties, and countless violent incidents. Dozens of diplomatic initiatives, including the ill-named “peace process” have failed.

When it comes to miracles in the Holy Land, can Pope Francis accomplish one? His landmark visit to Jordan, Palestine and Israel this past week certainly has raised hopes that the “soft power” of religion might succeed, if not in solving the issue but at least restarting efforts to bring about a reasonably just two-state solution.

Pope Francis, who has become known for being outspoken on issues of human rights and social justice, has recently concluded a politically heated three-day tour of the Holy Land. The Pope’s recent visit has come at a time not only of faltering peace talks but also during the formation of a long awaited Palestinian unity government, which may address some divisions in the political rift between the Hamas and Fatah factions. In response, Israel has threatened to effectively wage economic war on Palestinian banks and imposing more severe restrictions.

In what may become a defining moment in Pope Francis’s reign, and a powerful symbolic message, he made an unscheduled stop outside of Bethlehem at the separation wall where he placed his forehead in prayer against graffiti reading “Free Palestine” at a location that divides Palestinians from Jerusalem. The wall, which runs through the West Bank is called a security fence by Israel but is called the apartheid wall by many Palestinians and considered an attempt to confiscate land. The decision to enter the West
Bank to visit Bethlehem via Jordan as opposed to Israel is also interpreted by Palestinian leaders as a show of his support for a Palestinian state. The Pope also met with Palestinian leaders including Mahmoud Abbas as well as with youth from a Palestinian refugee camp. In response to the Pope’s prayer at the wall, Israel’s PM Netanyahu requested that the Pope makes an unscheduled visit to a memorial for Israeli terror victims located on Mt. Herzl. According to a press release by Netanyahu, he had apparently explained to the pontiff the importance of the wall in diverting terror attacks, in an apparent expression of disappointment at the Pope’s decision to pray at the separation wall.

During a speech at Ben-Gurion Airport addressed to PM Netanyahu the Pope implored that leaders secure a lasting peace in Jerusalem and called the current situation unacceptable. Meeting with Israeli president Peres, he reiterated his support for a two state solution at a time when such an arrangement has not seemed farther away. He also extended an invitation to both Peres and Abbas to join him at the Vatican for a unity prayer session, which both parties agreed to attend next month. In another attempt to build bridges the Pope met with Orthodox Patriarch Bartholomew for a unity service at the Church of the Holy Sepulchre, as well as signing a pledge to work together in solidarity. This is significant as Orthodox and Catholics make up the majority Christian populations in the Levant, yet they have been divided since the Great Schism in 1054 separated Rome and Constantinople.

Prior to the Pope’s visit, he has on repeated occasions expressed concern for dwindling Christian communities in the region, particularly those of Nazareth and the Galilee. The population of Christian Palestinians living in both Israel and the West Bank and Gaza is significant but has been steadily declining. This has been a trend across the region for different reasons in various areas. In Syria and Iraq the communities had enjoyed protection under the previous regimes but have in recent years come under threat. In Palestinian communities Christians are well integrated and often successful in local businesses, despite this fact they still face the same restrictions on movement and discriminatory policies of military occupation as their Muslim counterparts. Christian Palestinian families have also tended to be a more affluent segment of the society with more connections in western nations, and therefore had more options to resettle elsewhere.

Since the most recently stalled peace talks began there has been a sharp rise in ‘price tag’ attacks against Palestinians by Israeli nationalist and specifically an increase in attacks against Christian holy sites in Israel. Palestinian Christians living inside Israel have faced a dramatic increase in violent attacks by right-wing extremists in recent months. Israel’s Christian population has also been under threat from politicians who have in some areas restricted access to holy sites and others who have advocated the removal of the population from Israel. Threat of attacks from Jewish extremists prompted the Israeli government to dispatch 8,000 police officers for security during his visit to Jerusalem. During the Pope’s visit to Jerusalem more than 150 right-wing extremist violently protested his presence clashing with police and barricading themselves inside King David’s Tomb complex.

Within Israel reaction to the Pope’s visit was mostly negative. One immediate result was an Israeli decision to build 50 new settler houses in Har Homa settlement adjacent to Bethlehem, where the Pope had stopped at the “separation wall” to
acknowledge Palestinian suffering. An article in the Jerusalem Post of May 27 entitled “Pope Francis’s Unfriendly Visit” concluded that “Israelis and Jews around the world need to be aware of what is happening. Francis is leading the Catholic Church in a distressingly anti-Jewish direction.” Palestinians, however, were elated: despite the Pope’s visit to the tomb of Theodor Herzl, the father of Zionism, and his other pro-Israel gestures, they saw the Pope’s words and body language as expressing empathy for their cause. Clearly, neither side saw Pope Francis as a neutral figure; for Israelis he would not be a trusted mediator.

One potentially bright spot is that both the Palestinian and Israeli presidents have accepted Pope Francis’s invitation to come to the Vatican, but more than a prayer session will be necessary if a miracle is to occur. On balance, it appears that the Pope made more progress in promoting unity between the Latin and Orthodox Christian communities than between Palestinians and Israelis.