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The Palestinian Authority exploits the Pope's visit to make political and propaganda capital and attack Israel, especially regarding the sovereignty over Jerusalem (updated to May 12)



The Pope greets Sheikh Taysir Tamimi at the interfaith meeting. Sheikh Tamimi, the most senior religious figure in the Palestinian Authority, exploited the occasion to deliver an unscheduled speech attacking Israel, causing the Pope to leave before the end of the meeting (Photo: Tony Gentile for Reuters, May 11, 2009).

Overview

1. The Palestinian Authority has exploited Pope Benedict XVI's visit to Israel and the Palestinian Authority to make political and propaganda capital and to attack Israel on a number of issues, especially the sensitive one of **sovereignty over Jerusalem**. According to PA-affiliated spokesmen, Israel's presence in East Jerusalem does not give it sovereignty or any other rights, and opposition must be made to what they call the "Israel attempt to take charge of the Pope's visit to Jerusalem." Therefore, they stated that they would not coordinate his visit to the Palestinian Authority-administered territories with Israel and that they would set up a media center alternative to that provided by the Israeli Government Press Office. They also criticized the hanging of Israeli flags along the routes taken by the Pope to the eastern part of the city.

2. The visit was marred by an embarrassing incident which took place during a meeting between the Pope and representatives of the Jewish, Christian and Islamic faiths which was supposed to promote an interfaith dialogue and understanding. Shekih Taysir Tamimi, president of the Palestinian Authority's Sharia Islamic courts and in effect the most senior religious figure in the PA, exploited the occasion to deliver an inciting speech against Israel.¹ Tamimi interrupted the meeting to say that Israel had destroyed Palestinian cities and established settlements on Palestinian lands, that Jerusalem would remain the capital of Palestine and that religious figures all over the world should join forces to protect the Palestinians. In response to his remarks, the Pope left the meeting.

Reactions in the Palestinian Authority on the eve of the Pope's visit

3. On the eve of the Pope's visit, a group calling itself the Civic Coalition to Defend the Palestinians' Rights in Jerusalem (a network of non-governmental and religious institutions in Jerusalem) held a press conference in the Sheikh Jerah neighborhood of East Jerusalem. **Rafiq al-Husseini**, chief of the Palestinian presidential office, took the opportunity to welcome the Pope, whose visit he called "historic and important," adding that it would enable the Pope to see for himself the suffering of the Christian, Palestinian and Muslim residents of Jerusalem. He said that Israel should not be allowed to control the visit and exploit it to its own good. Palestinians in general and Jerusalemites in particular had to prove to the Pope, and to everyone, that they were defending their territory and the holy sites, and that Jerusalem had to be liberated from the "occupation" so that it could be the capital of the future independent Palestinian state. He added that the Pope had come to visit the holy

¹ Sheikh Taysir Tamimi has a long history of anti-Israeli incitement, especially on the Temple Mount.

places without political intentions, but that nevertheless, the Palestinians wanted to make their position fully clear to him (Wafa News Agency, May 6, 2009).

4. Public figures in the Palestinian Authority, eager for political capital, attempted to make a clear distinction between the Pope's visit to Israel and to the Palestinian Authority-administered territories. At a press conference in Ramallah, Rafiq al-Husseini said that there would be no dialogue or coordination with Israel regarding the Pope's visit to Jerusalem. He said that the Palestinians opposed Israel's attempt to exploit the visit to show their control over East Jerusalem, which was a "Palestinian territory occupied in 1967 along with the other Palestinian territories, and which we stress is the capital of the state of Palestine." He also opposed the hanging of Israeli flags along the Pope's route in East Jerusalem, calling it "provocation directed against the Palestinian people." He added that the Palestinian Authority, which operates in the name of the PLO in Jerusalem, had decided to set up its own media center at the Ambassador Hotel in East Jerusalem, and demanded that correspondents not use the Israeli Government Press Office's center. Should Israel close the Palestinian media center, he said, "we will set up press centers in tents" (Palestinian News Network website, May 9; *Al-Hayat Al-Jadeeda*, May 9, 2009).

5. Palestinian Authority Chairman **Mahmoud Abbas** welcomed the Pope's visit but blamed Israel for putting obstacles in the path of Palestinians who wanted to organize their own reception for the Pope and to present their positions (Wafa News Agency, May 11, 2009). Other reactions to the visit were the following:

i) **Adnan al-Husseini**, Palestinian Authority governor for the Jerusalem district, welcomed the visit but claimed that Israel's presence in Jerusalem, obtained by force, did not give it any rights or sovereignty over the city. He said that the Pope would have the opportunity to see for himself what "the condition of the Palestinians" was (Wafa News Agency, May 6, 2009).

ii) **Hana Amira**, a member of the PLO's executive committee, welcomed the visit in the name of the PLO and said that the religious nature of the visit had to be maintained and that Israel could not be allowed to exploit it for its own needs (Wafa News Agency, May 6, 2009).

iii) **Ziad al-Bandak**, chairman of the Palestinian Authority's Papal reception committee, said that Israel was politicizing the visit and was insistent on "imposing facts by force on the Holy City." He said that the Jerusalem Patriarchy had suggested a number of possible sites for press centers besides the Jerusalem city hall, but that Israel had stubbornly refused to accept them (Palestinian News Network website, May 9, 2009).

6. The **Liberation Party**, a radical Islamic party active in Judea and Samaria,² issued a statement calling the Pope "**Islam's enemy**" and his visit to Jordan and Israel "recognition of the fact that the Jews received the land of Palestine from the Crusaders." According to the statement, "the Islamic community of nations will not forgive anyone who welcomes this man, regardless of who he may be, and will not forgive the Pope and the Vatican for their repeated attacks against Muslims and Christians [sic] in the [Middle] East." It ended by expressing the hope that a day of reckoning with the world would come through the establishment of the Islamic Caliphate state.³ Sheikh Sayid al-Karami, a cleric affiliated with the party, called the Pope's visit a "Crusade."⁴

Responses from Hamas and the other terrorist organizations

7. Hamas, other Palestinian terrorist organizations and Islamic elements in the Gaza Strip responded negatively to the Pope's visit and tried to use it to further their own political ends. For example, on the eve of the visit Ismail Haniya, head of the Hamas de-facto administration, sent the Pope a public "invitation" to visit the Gaza Strip to "examine the damage done by Israel" and the "results of the siege." The aim of the so-called invitation was to show the Pope the "coexistence" Hamas claims exists between Muslims and Christians in the Gaza Strip⁵ (Al-Quds TV, May 7, 2009). The Council of Palestinian Sages in the Gaza Strip issued a press release criticizing the Pope's visit and the senior Islamic figures who announced they would meet him, because of his remarks against Islam. The release also demanded that the Pope retract those remarks (Filastin al-'An website, May 7, 2009).

8. Additional Hamas and other terrorist organization reactions to the Pope's visit were the following:

- i) Hamas spokesman **Fawzi Barhoum** said that recognition of the two-state solution was an acceptance of the right of the State of Israel, which is "racist and extremist," to exist on "Palestinian land," to which Benjamin Netanyahu aspires. He said that what the Pope and other individuals who came to the region had to do was exert pressure on Israel to stop its "aggression," end the settlements and give the Palestinians people

² A radical, pan-Islamic political party, originally Palestinian, whose objective is to reestablish the Islamic Caliphate (which was abolished in 1924) and institute Islamic religious law. The party favors "the liberation of Palestine" through jihad, and rejects any political arrangement with Israel. It does not engage in terrorist activities but wages a strenuous campaign of indoctrination and incitement.

³ <http://www.al-aqsa.org/index.php/news/show/1347>.

⁴ <http://www.al-aqsa.org/index.php/nidaat/nnidaa/C10/S22/N1283/>

⁵ Since Hamas gained control of the Gaza Strip there were several attacks against the tiny Christian minority living there. For further information see our June 2, 2008 bulletin "An increase in attacks on Christian and institutions identified with the West in the Gaza Strip" at http://www.terrorism-info.org.il/malam_multimedia/English/eng_n/html/gaza_020608e.htm.

their “rights.” He added that the Pope’s visit to the Shalit family was meant to “improve the occupation’s image” (Al-Manar TV, May 11, 2009).



Gilad Shalit’s parents meet with the Pope (Photo by Avi Ohayon for the Israeli Government Press Office, May 12, 2009)

ii) **Husam al-Tawil**, a Hamas member of the Palestinian Legislative Council, said that the Pope’s visit was important because he was a religious leader, but called on him to deal not only with the Holocaust of the Nazis, but with the “holocaust” in the Gaza Strip, and to join those censuring Operation Cast Lead and calling for the “siege” to be lifted. He also urged the Pope to meet with the families of Palestinian prisoners and not only with the parents of Gilad Shalit (Al-Quds, May 11, 1009).

iii) According to a **Palestinian Islamic Jihad** press release, the intentions of the Church did not inspire confidence because the Pope defamed Islam and had not apologized. In addition, during his visit to Jordan he spoke about a historic religious reconciliation between Christianity and Judaism and about Christian pilgrimages to the Holy Land, ignoring the fact it was “an occupied, stolen land.” Sanctimoniously pandering to the Jews and Zionists, continued the release, would not contribute to strengthening the relations between Islam and the Church (PalToday website, May 11, 2009).

iv) A press release issued by the **Zakaria Dugmush faction of the Popular Resistance Committees** attacked the Pope with the claim that since his election he had not made any positive comments about the Palestinian cause and that even now he ignored the issue. In addition, according to the release, his visit to Gilad Shalit’s family was a dismissal of the 11,000 Palestinian prisoners held in Israeli jails and an expression of support for Israel (PRC website, May 11, 2009).

Taysir Tamimi interrupts an official meeting with the Pope

9. One item on the Pope's agenda in Israel was an interfaith meeting on May 11 with representatives of the three monotheistic religions, whose goal was to promote a dialogue and understanding between Jews, Christians, and Muslims. The Pope spoke of the importance of unity between the three. However, Sheikh Tamimi, the president of the Palestinian Authority's Sharia religious courts, who was not scheduled to speak, forced his way on stage and delivered a strongly-worded speech attacking Israel. He said that Israel had destroyed Palestinian cities and established settlements on Palestinian land, and that Jerusalem would remain the Palestinian capital. He appealed to the Pope "in the name of the [one and] only God" to censure the crimes [of Israel] and to exert pressure on the Israeli government to stop its "aggression" against the Palestinian people. The Latin Patriarch attempted to silence him a number of times but was unsuccessful. The Pope then left the meeting, deciding to forgo the exchange of gifts (Al-Quds, May 11, 2009).

10. The sheikh was roundly criticized:

i) **Israeli Minister of Tourism Stas Misenzhnikov** said that Sheikh Tamimi's "provocation hurt, first and foremost, Pope Benedict XVI, who came to the Holy Land to promote peace and unity between the peoples of the region and all persons of faith...It is a shame that the extremists were those who represented the Palestinians and the Muslims in this important event..."

ii) **Vatican spokesman Father Federico Lombardi** censured Tamimi's speech, saying it was "not previewed and not desired," and indicated lack of recognition of [the process of] dialogue. In a media announcement he said that everyone hoped the incident would not adversely affect the Pope's message of strengthening peace and a dialogue between the religions and the religious dialogue about the Holy Land (Al-Quds, May 11, 2009). Rabbi Sha'ar Yeshuv Hachohen, the Chief Rabbinate's representative at the meeting, told the Israeli daily newspaper *Haaretz* that the Pope had been offended by the incident, saying he did not understand how "such a thing could happen" (*Haaretz*, May 12, 2009).

A short portrait of Sheikh Taysir Buyud Tamimi

11. Sheikh Taysir Buyud Tamimi, 69, comes from a large clan in Hebron and is the son of Sheikh Rajab Buyud Tamimi (who was the chief Qadi of Hebron and expelled after a terrorist attack in Hebron 1980). Sheikh Tamimi is an extremist Islamist and was considered a protégé of Yassir Arafat. He holds the highest religious position in the Palestinian Authority, head of

the Sharia religious courts. His other duties include serving as deputy chairman of the Palestinian Council of Religious Sages and sitting on the legislative board of Hebron University. His outburst at the meeting was preceded by **years of extremist anti-Israeli incitement**. He is well known for having delivered many anti-Israeli speeches from the pulpit of Al-Aqsa mosque on the Temple Mount, and was also detained several times by the Jerusalem police.