

Vatican–Israel Relations, 2000-2003: An Insider’s View

Yosef Lamdan

Yosef Lamdan served in the British Foreign Service from 1965 until 1971. In 1975, he joined the Israeli Foreign Ministry, serving, inter alia, at the UN, New York (1975-79), Beirut (1982), Washington (1985-89); as director of the North American Department in Jerusalem (1989-94); ambassador to the UN, Geneva (1994-99) and to the Holy See (2000-05). Dr. Lamdan recently edited Nostra Aetate: Origins, Promulgation, Impact on Jewish–Catholic Relations (2007), and is currently a member of the “Religious Actors in Conflict Areas” research group at the Truman Institute, the Hebrew University of Jerusalem.

In diplomatic terms, my tenure as the third ambassador of Israel to the Holy See,* commencing September 2000, was paradoxical—and, I believe, paradigmatic. Coming in the wake of Pope John Paul II’s unforgettable visit to Israel in March 2000, it started out with high, perhaps exaggerated, diplomatic and political expectations on Israel’s part. Very rapidly, the political relationship with the Vatican was plunged into a deep chill that had not thawed out completely when I relinquished my post in April 2003. For all practical purposes, the relationship was strictly contained and even on hold. Against that backdrop, the inter-religious dialogue between Catholics and Jews, and between Israel and the Holy See, which at first was not part of my formal diplomatic brief, took on greater significance and advanced considerably over the period. The inversion of the political and inter-religious relationships, and the system of checks and balances brought to bear on them by the Vatican, merit exploration.

John Paul’s Jubilee pilgrimage to the Holy Land was billed as purely religious. In practice, it had additional dimensions of import to Jews and to the State of Israel. Through his gestures and utterances at Yad Vashem, John Paul reaffirmed his enduring pain at the Shoah and the Church’s total rejection of antisemitism in all its forms. As the visit progressed, John Paul made the Israeli public aware of the profound changes in the Church’s positions vis-à-vis Jews, most vividly through his visit to the Western Wall. There he inserted a signed message, asking for God’s forgiveness for the suffering caused in the course of history to the children of Abraham, His chosen ones, and committing the Church to “genuine brotherhood with the people of the Covenant.” By calling on the president of Israel in Jerusalem and meeting with the prime minister, John Paul put the final

* This article is based on a personal diary that I kept as ambassador. The relevant diplomatic documentation remains classified and thus the absence of citations and references.

seal on the Vatican's diplomatic relations with Israel (established *de jure* in the 1993 Fundamental Agreement between the Holy See and Israel).

Hence, the belief was generated in Israel that the bilateral relationship was well set to grow stronger and closer. At the very least, Israel hoped for a more sympathetic ear to its positions and policies in the Arab–Israeli conflict, which would be conveyed to millions of believers worldwide. Without becoming directly involved in a “merely temporal conflict” (as put in the 1993 Agreement), it was hoped that the Pope would use his moral authority to advance the cause of peace in an evenhanded way. When I presented my credentials on September 18, the Pope's formal address was positive. He warmly recalled the “vivid experience” of his pilgrimage. Highlighting the spiritual patrimony common to Christians and Jews, he called for an expansion of inter-religious dialogue. While expressing sadness at the “elusive character” of a definitive peace in the Middle East, he urged “everyone” to press forward in the negotiations with hope and perseverance. At the same time, he alluded to the “delicate question” of Jerusalem and reiterated the Holy See's position seeking a “special, internationally guaranteed statute” to preserve the unique religious character of the city. In our private conversation, the Pope again stressed the need to advance Catholic–Jewish dialogue “to yet another station.”

Ten days later, Israel's dreams of political progress with the Vatican were shattered by the outbreak of the second intifada. The next months, indeed years, were characterized by Palestinian violence in the territories and escalating terror within Israel. This was countered by tough military action by the Israel Defense Forces (IDF), coupled with fierce policies designed to put down the intifada. The international community censured the Palestinian violence, but it was far more critical of Israel's responses. The Vatican was no exception. While its direct criticism of the Palestinians was muted, it perceptibly distanced itself from Israel and created a one-for-one linkage between the situation in the territories—or, more broadly, in the Holy Land—and any diplomatic or political collaboration with Israel.

Over the next months, that linkage was expressed in various ways. The time was “not appropriate” to discuss the mounting of a major Israeli exhibition on the “Cradle of Christianity” at the Vatican Museum. Despite the disturbing increase in anti-Jewish incidents in Europe in the fall of 2000, the Vatican declined to follow Western governments in speaking out against this phenomenon. This negative response was not simply based on the formal argument that the Pope's position was well known, but also on the strange argument that in light of the painful images broadcast daily on world television, any pronouncement against antisemitism might be construed as taking sides with Israel. In January 2001, a

high-level emissary dispatched by then prime minister Ehud Barak suggested that the Vatican (perhaps even the Pope himself) use its influence with Yasir Arafat in a last-minute effort to avert the collapse of the critical peace talks at Taba; no such action was taken. In March, in a letter making direct reference to the situation in the Holy Land, the Vatican rejected an invitation to join the Israeli embassy in a celebratory event to mark the first anniversary of the Pope's visit to the Holy Land. In May, senior Vatican officials and high-ranking clergy conspicuously absented themselves from Israel's Independence Day reception.

However, the most explicit—and devastating—expression of the Holy See's position came in the Pope's annual address to the Diplomatic Corps on January 13, 2001, when John Paul took the unusual step of sternly reproaching Israel in public. While recognizing those in Bethlehem (Palestinians) and in Jerusalem (Israelis) struggling on the road to peace, the Pope declared that one should not become resigned to daily guerilla warfare or to the persistence of injustice, the contempt for international law, the marginalization of the holy places and the requirements of the Christian communities. It was time to return to the principles of international legality: *inter alia*, the banning of the acquisition of territory by force, the right of peoples to self-determination, respect for UN resolutions and the Geneva Conventions. Israel was not mentioned by name but, except for the reference to "guerrilla warfare," the burden of the criticism and the appeals was squarely laid at Israel's door. It was tempting to speculate that pro-Palestinian elements in the Vatican Secretariat of State and beyond had taken advantage of the occasion in drafting the address. But the fact was that John Paul would not have voiced their words if he did not concur. He was clearly pained by the renewed cycle of violence and bloodshed in the Holy Land and perhaps personally distressed that his pilgrimage had not contributed to a more constructive approach to peacemaking.

Under these circumstances, indeed as long as hostilities continued, the forecast seemed bleak. Our inability to make inroads into the Secretariat of State, even in matters extraneous to the Middle East conflict, was vividly demonstrated during the Pope's visit to Syria in May 2001. President Bashir Assad, in greeting the Pope in Damascus on May 5, chose to make some blatantly antisemitic remarks, which appeared completely out of place, if not downright insulting to His Holiness. John Paul clapped politely after the speech, leading Israel to immediately call on the Vatican to issue a clarification disassociating the Pope from the unacceptable parts of the speech. To Israel's dismay, the Vatican declined to take this step, both during and after the visit. Besides representational and information work, Israel's diplomatic activities throughout 2001 were reduced to promoting a modest project with the Vatican's development agency, *Cor Unum*, to combat desertification in the Sahel region of sub-Saharan Africa (far from public view) and to arranging with

the Italian Council of Bishops an exchange program between high-school students in Tel-Aviv and Rome (too low-level to draw attention). The relationship with the Vatican was in danger of being drained completely. In the absence of other areas of diplomatic activity (economic or military, for example), a more fertile field of endeavor had to urgently be found.

That field was the inter-religious dialogue—even though it, too, was not without problems. *Dominus Iesus* had been published over the signature of Cardinal (now Pope) Joseph Ratzinger on August 6, 2000, ratified and confirmed by the Pope. That theological document, dealing primarily with the unicity and salvific universality of Jesus and the Roman Catholic Church, reverberated negatively among non-Catholics in religious dialogue with the Vatican. The immediate reaction of the chief rabbi of Rome was to cancel the only joint Catholic–Jewish event planned as part of the Jubilee Year celebrations. Behind-the-scenes consultations, in which I found myself unexpectedly involved, led to the publication of a front-page article by Cardinal Ratzinger in *L'Osservatore Romano* on December 29, in which he put the dialogue with the Jews on a different plane and in a different category from that with other religions. It was evident that the dialogue was important to the Pope and the Church, just as it was for the Jews, who chose to put the best possible face on Ratzinger's article, even though, from their point of view, it fell short in several respects. Preparations, therefore, proceeded for a meeting of the International [Catholic–Jewish] Liaison Committee (ILC) in New York in May 2001, after a hiatus of three years.

It was in this context that I recommended to the Israel Ministry of Foreign Affairs in April 2001 a greater Israeli involvement in the inter-religious dialogue, which had thus far been largely dominated by American Jews through an umbrella organization called the International Jewish Committee for Inter-religious Consultations (IJCIC). I argued that the dialogue could only be truly meaningful if due weight was given to the voice of Jews in Israel. Moreover, I argued that Israel's relations with the Vatican should be seen as integral to the extraordinary historical process of reconciliation between Catholics and Jews. This approach represented a significant shift in the mandate of the Israeli ambassador to the Holy See, but it was accepted by Jerusalem and also—tacitly—by the Vatican, which agreed to my participation in the meetings of the ILC as an active observer, involved, for example, in the drafting of documents produced in New York (and at the subsequent ILC meeting in Buenos Aires in 2004).

This expansion of my mandate opened the way for the Israeli Embassy's involvement in other Catholic–Jewish activities—for example, in promoting the establishment of a Center for Jewish Studies at the Pontifical Gregorian University in Rome. This initiative was timely, since Catholic donors who had contributed handsomely

to setting up the Center for the Study of Christianity at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem were interested in founding a companion center at the Gregorian. The Cardinal Bea Center for Judaic Studies was formally opened in December 2001, and shortly thereafter a diploma and a master's degree in Jewish Studies were available for the first time in the Church's history.

By that same token, the embassy made representations to try to preserve official programs to advance Catholic understanding of the Jewish faith, which the Vatican was seeking to trim, such as the *Service International de Documentation Judéo-Chrétienne* (SIDIC) run by the Sisters of Zion as part of their vocation following the Second Vatican Council, and the Jewish studies program conducted for many years by the Pontifical Ratisbonne Institute in Jerusalem. Those efforts proved unsuccessful and the programs were transferred to the Cardinal Bea Center in Rome in October and November 2002, respectively.

The embassy undertook other initiatives that previously would not have been within its normal diplomatic purview. It encouraged the then chief rabbi of Israel, Israel Meir Lau, to attend the San Egidio Inter-Religious Meeting at Barcelona in 2001. It lent its patronage to events in Rome in 2001 and 2002 to commemorate *Nostra Aetate* (the Second Vatican Council's 1965 declaration that modified the Church's attitude to the Jews and Judaism). It urged the Curia to update its guidance to clergy on the exposition of *Nostra Aetate*. And in the spring of 2003, it organized a seminar on Jewish and Catholic concepts of the family between the Shalom Hartman Institute in Jerusalem and the John Paul II Pontifical Institute on Matrimony and the Family at the Pontifical Lateran University in Rome.

In July 2001, a Vatican–IJCIC panel of Catholic–Jewish scholars studying the Vatican's activities during World War II suspended its work, amid harsh recriminations on both sides.¹ The Vatican effectively suspended relations, albeit temporarily, with IJCIC and began to pursue alternative channels for dialogue with the Jews. It signaled an interest in a direct dialogue with the Chief Rabbinate in Israel, something which had been lightly touched upon during the Pope's 2000 visit and aired on occasion since then. The embassy decided to probe this channel. I worked directly with Chief Rabbi Lau and his director-general, and indirectly with the Papal Nuncio, Archbishop Pietro Sambi, laying the ground for the matter to be agreed upon in principle with Cardinal Walter Kasper, as president of the Commission for Religious Relations with the Jews, during a visit to Jerusalem in November 2001. Thereafter, preliminary meetings were held in Jerusalem in June 2002, and the first formal session of the Vatican–Chief Rabbinate dialogue was conducted outside Rome in March 2003. Since then, this framework has met seven times (most recently in Jerusalem in March 2007). In and of itself, these encounters are totally remarkable, considering the centuries of suspicion, if not

alienation, between the Catholic Church and Orthodox Jewish establishments—and all the more so, given that it was launched at a low point in Israel–Vatican bilateral relations.

With strides being made in inter-religious activities and the political relationship on hold, the diplomatic channel remained open. Curiously, the chill in the relationship was diminished somewhat by a wholly external event—the terrorist attack on the Twin Towers in New York on September 11, 2001. The Vatican was shocked, and in his World Day of Peace message on January 1, 2002, John Paul forcefully spoke out against terrorism in all its forms, including terror in the name of God and religion. The filter-down effect of this unequivocal position was evident in the Pope’s address to the Diplomatic Corps ten days later which, from Israel’s standpoint, contained a modicum of balance absent from the 2001 address. While recognizing the “injustice of which the Palestinian people have been victims for more than fifty years,” John Paul continued: “No one can contest the right of the Israeli people to live in security.” From that point on, the Vatican was prepared to recognize Israel’s right to self defense (while generally questioning the proportionality of Israel’s responses in the exercise of that right). Incidentally, in the same address, the Pope expressed the hope that the international community would be enabled to fulfill its “irreplaceable role” in the conflict, with the agreement of all parties. This position developed into firm Vatican support for a two-state solution, as advocated by the Quartet from April 2002 onwards, balanced by recognition of Israel’s right to peace and security.

Other signs of some easing in the Vatican’s stance followed. For years, Israel’s relations with the Vatican had been severely hampered by the lack of progress in the so-called “financial talks” over property, economic and fiscal matters relating to the Church, its institutions and communities in Israel. Early in 2002, after a long hiatus, the Vatican proposed a meeting of the Permanent Bilateral Working Commission, headed by the deputy foreign ministers on both sides. The Commission’s discussions, on matters of principle, were held in a friendly atmosphere in the Vatican on March 12. Hopes of accelerated progress were raised by Israel’s deputy foreign minister, Rabbi Michael Melchior. The latter was also well received by the secretary for relations with states, Archbishop Jean-Louis Tauran who, while giving no quarter regarding the Vatican’s known positions on the violence in the territories and its criticism of Israel, allowed that there was room for invigorating the bilateral relationship, perhaps in the cultural field. That evening, Cardinal Achille Silvestrini joined Rabbi Melchior in a public event, attended by ranking Catholic prelates, diplomats and representatives of the Jewish community, to mark the second anniversary of the Pope’s visit to Israel.

Following a wave of horrific suicide bombings in Israel in March, the IDF launched an operation, called “Defensive Shield,” to root out and destroy terrorist cells and infrastructures in the West Bank. In that context, the Vatican and Israel were thrown into close diplomatic contact with the entry on April 2 of some sixty armed Palestinian terrorists into the Church of the Nativity in Bethlehem, together with about 160 Palestinian civilians seeking refuge. While *L’Osservatore Romano* and various Catholic groups were allowed to voice unbridled and distorted criticism of the IDF for sealing off the compound surrounding the church, the Vatican worked quietly and effectively with Israel to protect its interests. First, it sought—and received on April 9—written assurances from the president of Israel that the IDF would not assault the church. Then, it turned its attentions to the humanitarian problem of the civilians and the forty or so clergy of various denominations trapped within the church, assigning the bulk of work to its ambassador in Israel and the Franciscans, who were the largest single clerical group within the church. On May 1, Cardinal Roger Etchegaray was dispatched as a papal envoy to the area, ostensibly to offer spiritual comfort to those still trapped within the church but in fact “to contribute my little stone to... the construction of peace on this bloodstained land,” as he put it (ZENIT news agency, May 2, 2002). The IDF did not allow the cardinal to conduct a mass in the church for fear of his personal safety, but he did meet with President Moshe Katsav and discuss ideas to relieve the situation inside the church (which were swiftly rejected by Yasir Arafat, then penned up in his headquarters in Ramallah by the IDF).

This close cooperation lasted throughout the thirty-nine-day ordeal and proved the value of the diplomatic relationship, even in times of political disagreement. It should be noted that the Vatican also viewed this painful episode against the backdrop of a protracted crisis over Muslim attempts to build a mosque in the vicinity of the Church of the Annunciation in Nazareth. That crisis was only resolved by an Israeli ministerial commission in January 2002. Taken together, both incidents were seen as a vindication of the Vatican’s position seeking a special statute, internationally guaranteed, to protect the holy places.

After the Bethlehem crisis, some improvement in the “atmospherics” of the relationship could be sensed. On May 10, one day after the crisis ended, Foreign Minister (now President) Shimon Peres was received for a broad discussion on the prospects for Middle Eastern peace by Secretary of State Cardinal Angelo Sodano and Archbishop Tauran, the two men firmly in charge of Vatican foreign policy during John Paul’s twilight years. In practical terms, however, except for a tentative “personal suggestion” from Archbishop Tauran in September that he might visit Israel in 2003 to strengthen the bilateral relationship, little, if anything, changed over those months. In frustration, I dared to suggest to Jerusalem that

our deployment at the Vatican be reviewed and was duly dressed down for thinking such “heretical” thoughts.

Then, in December 2002, the Pope agreed to receive the president of Israel in a private audience, parallel to a high-level visit the president was making to Italy. This development was a noteworthy precedent (complementing the Pope’s call on the president of Israel in 2000), and was also the first entrée to John Paul offered to a ranking Israeli official since the outbreak of the second intifada over two years before.

The audience was conducted without note-takers. President Katsav voiced concern for the ongoing lack of substance in the bilateral relationship. In response, John Paul II said he attached special importance to their meeting and expressed the hope that it could be a “turning point” in the relationship. Immediately thereafter, the president informed Secretary of State Sodano of the conversation and inquired what he thought the Pope may have had in mind when he spoke of a “turning point.” Somewhat surprised, Cardinal Sodano volunteered that the Vatican would consider seriously the request to bolster the relations and would see if new elements could be identified in it. Pressed by the president, he added that perhaps the audience could mark a fresh “point of departure” in the relationship and also be an appropriate moment to step up efforts to achieve peace.

All this while, the financial talks had continued in Israel, but to the Vatican’s disappointment no breakthroughs were forthcoming. Within days of the president’s audience with the Pope, the Vatican’s ambassador let it authoritatively be known in Jerusalem that progress in the bilateral relationship was now conditional upon the conclusion of the financial talks. In brief, Vatican officials had stepped in and found another linkage to fetter the relationship and keep it on a low flame. In sum, any significant “turning point” was, at least for the time being, illusory and perhaps would not come about until major changes took place in the Holy See.

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In hindsight, Israel’s dreams of a closer political relationship with the Vatican were not grounded in reality and were generated by a faulty reading of aspects of the Pope’s Jubilee pilgrimage in 2000. Given the Vatican’s particular interests in the Holy Land (especially Jerusalem and the holy places), its specific positions on the Middle East conflict and its concern for neutrality (at least in its own estimation) between Israelis and Palestinians, anything even remotely suggestive of a political rapprochement with Israel was a total non-starter—and will probably remain so. The second intifada demonstrated that in pursuit of its positions, the Vatican was prepared to be extremely tough, effectively putting the political

relationship with Israel on a complete hold for well over two years. The same can be said of the Vatican's tactics in pursuing interests of a different order, as with the financial talks.

Additionally, the intifida demonstrated how very narrow Israel's diplomatic and political relationship with the Vatican was—and remains. The base was widened by adding an inter-religious dimension. The Vatican will continue to support inter-religious activities with Israel and Jews at large, though at a certain point (which may have already been reached), it will look over its shoulder to the Catholic-Muslim dialogue—and proceed with circumspection.

Underlying all this is the fact that the Israel-Vatican relationship was—and remains—of special importance to both sides. For deep historical, religious, cultural and symbolic reasons, the relationship is of unique significance, distinguishing it from other bilateral relationships maintained by Israel and the Holy See. Hence, there is every reason to assume that it will remain a constant, severe strains notwithstanding, as was amply demonstrated during the testing period of the second intifida. The variables are the substance and “warmth /chill” factors, over which the Vatican will retain most of the control.

Notes

¹ This incident, caused by the Vatican's rejection of the Commission's request to have direct access to archival material from the World War II period, revived public interest in the possible canonization of Pope Pius XII. From the point of view of “official Israel,” this was an issue between the Jewish people and the Vatican and not one pertaining to the bilateral relationship between the State of Israel and the Holy See, to which it was potentially damaging. This distinction was carefully maintained, except for one unhelpful intervention towards the end of 2001, when the then Israel ambassador in Paris floated certain proposals with the late Cardinal Jean-Marie Lustiger, with a view to advancing matters. This unauthorized initiative, which reverberated in Rome, also foundered on the Vatican's refusal to grant access to its archives.