Vatican
Vatican News
The pope enters room alone using cane.

Pope Francis, walking with a cane, greets visitors as he arrives to the Paul VI Audience Hall for his weekly general audience at the Vatican Dec. 18, 2024. (CNS/Lola Gomez)

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Israel's minister of diaspora affairs and combating antisemitism asked Pope Francis to clarify his remarks about the need to investigate whether the current war in Gaza constitutes a genocide.

"As a people who lost six million of their sons and daughters in the Holocaust, we are particularly sensitive to the trivialization of the term 'genocide' — a trivialization that comes dangerously close to Holocaust denial," Amichai Chikli, the minister, said in an open letter addressed to Francis and published by several news outlets Dec. 20. The Italian newspaper, Il Foglio, published the entire letter online.

Chikli also criticized the pope's presence at an event "echoing the Palestinian narrative, depicting Jesus as a Palestinian Arab."

The event was Francis meeting with the artisans, volunteers and government representatives responsible for the Christmas decorations in St. Peter's Square and in the Paul VI Audience Hall Dec. 7.

The Nativity scene in the square came from the island town of Grado, Italy, and showed Mary, Joseph and the empty crib in a traditional mud and thatch fishing hut found in northern Italy, while the scene in the audience hall was donated by people from Bethlehem and Palestinian authorities. It featured olive-wood statues of Mary, Joseph and the baby Jesus, who was lying on a white and black kaffiyeh, a Palestinian headdress.

Photos of the pope admiring the scene in the hall evoked criticism at the time by some commentators, saying the choice seemed to imply that Jesus was born a Palestinian rather than a Jew. Bethlehem, Jesus' birthplace, is in Palestinian territory.

When the pope stopped to pray before the Bethlehem creche at the end of his general audience Dec. 11, the baby Jesus statue and kaffiyeh-draped manger were gone. The Vatican press office offered no comment beyond a reminder that traditionally the baby is not placed in a Nativity scene until Christmas Eve.

"There is no other way to understand the decision to present (Jesus') image in a cradle, wrapped in a keffiyeh," Chikli wrote. "It is a well-known fact that Jesus was born of a Jewish mother, lived as a Jew and died as a Jew."

Had this "strange tribute" been an "isolated case, I would not have written this letter," the minister wrote.

What drove him to write, he said, were remarks published a few weeks before with "an even more serious expression: you echoed a new accusation of genocide, insinuating that the state of Israel 'might' be guilty of genocide in Gaza."

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An excerpt from the book, "Hope Never Disappoints: Pilgrims Toward a Better World," written with the journalist Hernán Reyes Alcaide, was published Nov. 17 by Vatican News and other outlets, quoting the pope saying the international community should investigate whether Israel's military actions in Gaza constitute genocide.

"According to some experts, what is happening in Gaza has the characteristics of genocide. It should be investigated carefully to determine whether it fits into the technical definition formulated by jurists and international bodies," the pope said in the book.

Chikli wrote that the leading proponent "of this new charge against Israel is the human rights organization, Amnesty International," which released a report Dec. 5 titled, "'You Feel Like You Are Subhuman': Israel’s Genocide Against Palestinians in Gaza."

"This is a desperate and disgusting attempt to rewrite history," he wrote, accusing the report of claiming that Israel launched "an unprovoked attack on the Gaza Strip on Oct. 7, 2023." The report, however, did not deny the attack while investigating Israel's "military offensive launched in the wake of the deadly Hamas-led attacks," it said.

Chikli wrote, "Israel did not launch any attack against Gaza; quite the contrary. The terrorist organization Hamas, together with thousands of Gazans, launched a vicious attack against the southern region of Israel," committing "horrific war crimes against humanity."

"It is a right and a moral duty to fight evil, to fight the jihadist monsters of Hamas. It is puzzling that this has to be explained to the world," he wrote.

In the letter, he described genocide as the attacks against the less than one percent of Germany's unarmed Jewish population in the 1930s at a time when "there had been no violent conflict — territorial, religious or political."

"At Treblinka, 845,000 Polish Jews were murdered. This is what genocide means," he wrote, adding that "The Vatican's silence during those dark days of the Shoah is still deafening."

The Israeli minister told the pope, "We know that you are a dear friend of the Jewish people; this year alone, you have met with hostage families, wounded soldiers, rabbis and Jewish leaders from around the world."

"We appreciate these efforts and wish to deepen the relationship between the Vatican and the state of Israel, as well as between the Christian and Jewish people," he wrote, noting next year's 60th anniversary of Nostra Aetate, the Second Vatican

Council's 1965 document on relations with other religions, which also ushered in a new era in Catholic-Jewish relations.

"Your guidance, actions and leadership have immense influence throughout the world," the minister wrote. "For this reason, I kindly ask you to clarify your position regarding the new accusation of genocide against the Jewish state."