Vatican

Vatican News



Pope Francis prays in front of the Western Wall, in Jerusalem's Old City May 26, 2014. (AP Photo/Oded Balilty, File)



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Jerusalem — April 25, 2025
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Hours after Pope Francis' death was announced, Israel's Foreign Ministry posted a short message on X: "Rest in peace, Pope Francis. May his memory be a blessing." Several hours later, it was deleted without explanation.

Coming at a time of effusive global mourning over Francis' death, the decision to delete the post appeared to reflect the tensions that have emerged between Israel and the Vatican over Francis' frequent criticism of Israel's conduct during the war in Gaza. The Foreign Ministry declined to comment on the deletion.

Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu is usually quick to issue statements on the passing of major international figures. It took him four days to issue a terse, 28-word statement on the official Prime Minister account, and Foreign Minister Gideon Saar has been silent. The only immediate official condolences came from Israel's president, Isaac Herzog, who holds a largely ceremonial role and who praised Francis for being "a man of deep faith and boundless compassion."

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For most of Francis' papacy, ties between Israel and the Vatican steadily improved — highlighted by a visit to the Holy Land in 2014.

But everything changed after the war in Gaza erupted with Hamas' deadly attack in southern Israel on Oct 7, 2023.

While expressing sympathy for Israeli victims and hostages, Francis has suggested Israel's subsequent attacks in Gaza and Lebanon were "immoral" and disproportionate. He also called for an investigation to determine if Israel's attacks in Gaza constitute genocide, a charge Israel denies while investigations at the U.N.'s top courts proceed.

"Pope Francis condemned what happened on Oct. 7, but he was clear also that what happened on Oct. 7 does not justify what has been happening since Oct. 7," said Wadie Abunassar, who heads a group that represents Christians in Israel and the Palestinian territories.

Francis was like a friend who tells the truth, even if that's not exactly what you want to hear, Abunassar said.

Throughout the war, Francis walked a delicate balance between his close ties with Israel and condemning the devastating losses in Gaza, according to Amnon Ramon, an expert on Christianity in Israel and a senior researcher at the Jerusalem Institute for Policy Research. Francis was exceptionally close to Gaza's local parish priest, who, like the former pontiff, is from Argentina.

A history of tension

Israel has historically had a fragile relationship with the Vatican. It stems from anger over the Vatican's perceived lack of action during World War II, when critics argue Pope Pius XII kept silent during the Holocaust despite possible knowledge of the Nazi plan to exterminate the Jews. Supporters insist he used quiet diplomacy to save Jewish lives.

In the 1960s, the Vatican underwent a series of dramatic transformations, including, among other things, changing the church's attitude towards Jews over what was long seen as their collective culpability for the crucifixion of Jesus, Ramon explained. The Holy See formally launched diplomatic relations with Israel in 1993.

Christians make up less than 2% of the Holy Land's population. There are about 182,000 in Israel, 50,000 in the West Bank and 1,300 in Gaza, according to the U.S. State Department.

At the start of Francis' papacy, the relationship with Israel warmed significantly. Francis visited the Holy Land in 2014 as one of his first international trips, when he met with Netanyahu, who was prime minister at the time. Then-President Shimon Peres visited the Vatican multiple times, including with Palestinian Authority President Mahmoud Abbas to plant a peace tree in the Vatican Gardens.

But the Israeli government's rightward shift, and the ongoing war with Gaza, strained the ties.



Pope Francis is flanked by Israel's President Shimon Peres, right, and Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas during an evening of peace prayers in the Vatican gardens June 8, 2014. (AP Photo/Gregorio Borgia, File)

The pope voiced concern for hostages held in Gaza

"Pope Francis expressed himself for the first time on Oct. 8, the day after the war began, and he followed the same line right through the end of his life: war is defeat, there's no victory for war," said Fr. David Neuhaus, a local priest who served as a spokesperson during the pope's 2014 visit.

"He expressed great concern for hostages, but said violence should stop and Israel is using force to something that cannot be achieved by force," Neuhaus said. Francis also met the families of hostages held in Gaza and Palestinians affected by the war.

In an interview with The Associated Press in April 2023, the leader of Catholics in the Holy Land, Cardinal Pierbattista Pizzaballa said that Netanyahu's far-right government has made life worse for Christians in the birthplace of Christianity. He

noted an increase in attacks against Christian sites, pilgrims and religious leaders.

Although world leaders, including U.S. President Donald Trump and French President Emmanuel Macron, will attend Francis' funeral, Israel will only send its Vatican ambassador, a lower-level diplomat.

Foreign Ministry spokesperson Oren Marmorstein said this was due partially to scheduling conflicts and the funeral taking place on Saturday, the Jewish Sabbath, which requires Israeli politicians to stay within walking distance of the funeral. The decision was not indicative of any tension with the Vatican, he said.

"Israel will be represented in the most official way in the funeral through our ambassador there," said Marmorstein. "There were things we didn't agree with, but we are taking part in the funeral."



Latin Patriarch of Jerusalem Pierbattista Pizzaballa fist bumps as he is greeted on arrival to the Rosary Sisters School, which was damaged last month during an 11-day war between Israel and the Hamas militant group that rules Gaza, in Gaza City June 14, 2021. (AP Photo/Adel Hana, File)

Francis emphasized mercy in a polarized world

"Pope Francis was one of the best friends of Israel, but Israeli leadership didn't understand him properly," said Abunassar, the coordinator of the Holy Land Christian forum. Abunassar, a Catholic from the northern Israeli city of Haifa, said he was angry that the Israeli government hadn't sent official condolences except through the president.

"The man was the leader of the most important church in the world. The man was the head of state. The man has followers among people who are Israeli taxpayers. The man deserves some respect."

Netanyahu has publicly expressed condolences for the passing of other world leaders, including Queen Elizabeth II and former president Jimmy Carter, who was critical of Israel.

On April 23, hundreds of people streamed into the Church of the Holy Sepulcher, built on top of the site where tradition holds Jesus was crucified, buried and resurrected, for a special requiem mass in honor of Pope Francis.

Also in attendance were many representatives from Orthodox Christianity, a nod to Francis' strong support for interfaith ties and his groundbreaking meeting with Ecumenical Patriarch of Constantinople Bartholomew I in Jerusalem in 2014, after centuries of strained relationships between the two churches.

Neuhaus said he hopes the next pope will follow the same message as Francis.

"I hope it will be someone who will put emphasis on mercy, someone who could bring us all together," he said. "We live in such a divided, polarized world."

This story appears in the **The Legacy of Pope Francis** feature series. View the full series.