

Published on *National Catholic Reporter* (<https://www.ncronline.org>)

October 25, 2010 at 8:01am

Acrimony with Israel clouds close of Middle East Synod

by John L. Allen Jr.

NCR Today

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In some ways, the surprise of the Oct. 10-24 Synod of Bishops for the Middle East may not be that it ended amid acrimony involving Israel, the Vatican, and the mostly Arab bishops of the region. Instead, the surprise may be that it took so long to happen.

As the synod wrapped up on Sunday, Israeli Deputy Foreign Minister Danny Ayalon complained that it had turned into "a forum for political attacks on Israel, in the best history of Arab propaganda."

Ayalon specifically objected to a comment made at the synod's closing press conference on Saturday by Greek Melkite Archbishop Cyrille Salim Bustros, who's actually based in Newton, Massachusetts.

Read NCR's full coverage of the Synod of Bishops for the Middle East: Index of stories from the Synod.

Bustros was commenting on a line in the synod's final message, which rejected use of the Bible to justify injustice.

"We Christians cannot speak of the 'promised land' as an exclusive right for a privileged Jewish people," Bustros said. "This promise was nullified by Christ. There is no longer a chosen people - all men and women of all countries have become the chosen people."

Some Jews took that line as an expression of theological "Supersessionism," meaning that the coming of Christ "cancelled" God's covenant with Israel -- a view that the Second Vatican Council and subsequent papal teaching has been understood to reject. Some Israelis likewise saw it as a rejection of Israel as a "Jewish state."

In a statement to reporters on Monday, a spokesperson appeared to try to distance the Vatican from those impressions.

"If you want a synthetic expression of the positions of the synod, you have to look at the 'Message,' which is the lone written text actually approved by the synod," said Jesuit Fr. Federico Lombardi -- suggesting that individual comments at press conferences don't carry the same weight.

Lombardi insisted that the overall tone of the synod was positive.

Earlier, Ayalon blasted Bustros' statement as "a libel against the Jewish people and the State of Israel."

Likewise, Rabbi David Rosen, a longtime veteran of Catholic/Jewish dialogue who had been invited to address the synod, charged that Bustros' words "reflect either shocking ignorance or insubordination in relation to the Catholic Church's teaching on Jews and Judaism flowing from the Vatican II declaration *Nostra Aetate*."

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Given the depressingly binary nature of the politics of the Middle East, it's probably par for the course that while Israelis objected to Bustros' comments and the synod documents, they have been hailed both by officials of the Palestinian National Authority and the Mubarak government in Egypt.

Heading into the synod, Vatican officials had quietly warned that it shouldn't turn into a forum for Israel-bashing. The concern was based on the fact that the tiny Christian minority of the region, anxious to prove its Arab credentials, is often outspokenly supportive of the Palestinians and critical of Israeli policy.

Coupled with centuries of ambivalence in the broader Catholic/Jewish relationship, the perceived "Palestinian bias" of church leaders in the Middle East makes Israeli media and political leaders keenly sensitive to anything that strikes them as imbalanced or unfair.

Early on there seemed some flirtation with that danger, as speakers outside the synod hall lined up to complain about a proposed new loyalty oath in Israel for non-Jewish citizens. By itself, however, that position didn't seem to stir much resentment in Israel, possibly because many Israelis -- including Rosen himself -- have themselves questioned the wisdom of the oath.

As the synod unfolded, there was actually precious little direct commentary on Israel, beyond generic expressions of solidarity with the Palestinian people. Instead, there was a strikingly frank discussion of the difficulties Christians often experience in several Muslim-dominated societies in the region, such as Iraq, Egypt, and some of the Gulf States, above all Saudi Arabia.

By the end, however, some Israelis obviously felt things had reverted to form.

If the only point of reference had been the synod's official documents -- its final message and its set of 44 propositions submitted to Pope Benedict XVI -- perhaps the reaction on the Israeli side would not have

been as ferocious.

The concluding message does refer to the damaging consequences of Israeli "occupation," as well the security wall, military checkpoints, political prisoners, and efforts to alter the demographic balance of Jerusalem. However, it also acknowledges the "suffering and insecurity in which Israelis live," and at the policy level did no more than reiterate the Vatican's long-standing commitment to a two-state solution.

The statement also condemned anti-Semitism, along with "anti-Christianism and Islamophobia. Proposition 41 rejected "anti-Semitism and anti-Judaism," albeit adding "while distinguishing between religion and politics."

In perhaps the most incendiary bit of rhetoric, the final message said that "recourse to theological and Biblical positions which use the Word of God to wrongly justify injustices is not acceptable," and that line came in the context of a paragraph on relations with Judaism "suggesting a bit of finger-pointing at Israel and traditional Jewish claims to the "Promised Land."

That was the line that occasioned Bustros' comments at the closing press conference.

Israeli Foreign Ministry spokesperson Yigal Palmor actually asserted that the bishops at the synod were "committing a sin towards the truth" by ignoring the fact that "Israel is the one country in the region that is welcoming to Christians."

The claim that Christians in Israel are better off than anywhere else in the Middle East was made during the synod by Rosen, and in the run-up to the event by the Israeli Embassy to the Holy See, which released census data showing that the Christian population inside Israel itself is growing.

(Official Vatican data released at the beginning of the synod about the Catholic population in Israel showed that it's grown since 1980 in raw numbers, but declined as a percentage of the overall population. New Christian immigrants in Israel tend to be disproportionately Orthodox, from the former Soviet Union.)

On the other hand, several synod participants disputed those claims. Bernard Sabella, a Palestinian Catholic at Bethlehem University, said that recent polling shows the same percentage of young Arab Christians inside Israel as in the Palestinian Territories wants to emigrate, because they perceive themselves as second-class citizens in Israel.

Other voices in the synod argued that Christians are at least as well off in Syria and Jordan as in Israel.

Whatever the rights and wrongs of those claims, it seems clear that the Synod of Bishops for the Middle East is likely to be remembered as yet another flash point in relations between Israel and the Vatican, as well as Israel and the Christian leaders of the Middle East.

The fallout could have consequences for open issues in Israeli/Vatican relations, including long-running negotiations over the legal and tax status of church institutions in Israel. Facing theoretically crippling tax liability, church negotiators have been hoping for help from the Foreign Ministry "precisely the department that seems most vexed about the statements at the synod.

One potentially interesting twist is this: During the synod, there was a brief contretemps over the "Kairos Document," a recent ecumenical statement from Christian leaders in the Middle East which was critical of Israeli policy, and, most explosively, suggested a disinvestment strategy similar to the anti-apartheid struggle in South Africa.

While the former Latin Patriarch of Jerusalem, Michel Sabbah, was among the presenters of the document, his successor, Fouad Twal, insisted on the margins of the synod that the 'Kairos Document' had not been formally endorsed by the Catholic church.

While both Sabbah and Twal are Arabs and clearly supportive of a Palestinian state, there is a key difference: Sabbah was born in Nazareth in 1933, and is therefore himself a Palestinian. Twal is Jordanian, and hence has a bit more personal distance from the Israeli/Palestinian dispute.

Perhaps, therefore, Twal can play a role in smoothing the waters with Israel in the wake of the synod without taking the sting out of the point that the bishops wanted to make, which is the call for a 'sincere, just and permanent peace.'

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