NATIONAL CATHOLIC REPORTER
Published on *National Catholic Reporter* (https://www.ncronline.org)

With world on the brink, can Benedict be a firebreak?

John L. Allen Jr. | Sep. 13, 2012 NCR Today

ROME -- Even before the deaths of U.S. Ambassador Christopher Stevens and three other Americans in Libya on Tuesday, Pope Benedict XVI?s Sept. 14-16 trip to Lebanon shaped up as a high wire act. The pontiff will have to navigate Lebanon?s complex inter-faith mix, against the backdrop of what amounts to civil war in neighboring Syria.

Now the trip also becomes the first visit of a major Western leader to the Arab world after the attacks in Egypt and Libya, and with the prospect of more violence on the horizon. Big questions loom: Will the pope?s presence inflame extremist Islamic sentiment even further? Or, will the visit act as a firebreak, offering a counter-narrative of Muslim-Christian harmony?

tIf the pope, arguably the preeminent symbol of Western civilization, is well received in a country known as a Hezbollah stronghold, it could offer hope for cooler heads to prevail all across the region.

tIn either event, this 24th foreign journey by Benedict XVI, and his fourth to the Middle East, could potentially be among his most consequential.

tAware of the risks, the Vatican has already sent conciliatory signals. Jesuit Fr. Federico Lombardi, the Vatican spokesperson, released a statement on Tuesday expressing sympathy for Muslims upset with an anti-Islamic American film cited as a pretext for the attacks in Egypt and Libya.

?Profound respect for the beliefs, texts, outstanding figures and symbols of the various religions is an essential precondition for the peaceful coexistence of peoples,? Lombardi said.

?The serious consequences of unjustified offence and provocations against the sensibilities of Muslim believers are once again evident in these days, as we see the reactions they arouse, sometimes with tragic results, which in their turn nourish tension and hatred, unleashing unacceptable violence,? he said.

Lombardi said that Benedict will bring a ?message of dialogue and respect for all believers of different religions? to Lebanon.

All signs suggest the pope?s Lebanese hosts want the visit to succeed.

Last week, Prime Minister Najib Mikati, a Sunni Muslim, announced that Saturday would be declared a national holiday in honor of the pope?s arrival. Hezbollah?s leader, Sheik Hassan Nasrallah, has publicly welcomed the visit, describing it as ?extraordinary and historic.?

Other Muslim leaders have also struck positive notes, including Grand Mufti Sheikh Rashid Qabbani, a Sunni.

?The regimes in the Arab world are changing, and we all want to have security and equality and justice. I hope the pope?s visit will reflect that,? Qabbani said.

Shiite cleric Sayyed Mohammad Hasan al-Amin was equally enthusiastic.

?Christians are a major part of the Lebanese structure, and the pope?s visit emphasizes coexistence between Muslims and Christians in the country,? he said.

On Wednesday night, the ?Asia News? agency reported that Christians and Muslims came together in Beirut?s Museum Square to stage a prayer vigil in advance of the pope?s arrival. Musical bands played, and Muslim read verses from the New Testament while a Christian read passages from the Qur?an.

Moreover, there?s wide regional interest. In Egypt, Fr. Rafic Greiche, spokesman for the Egyptian Catholic Church, said it?s vital the papal trip go ahead.

?This visit is a great opportunity to show that peace is the only possible alternative to hatred and war,? Greiche said.

?Benedict XVI?s presence a few kilometers from Syria is a message of solidarity and dialogue for the Middle East, and for the Christian and Muslim populations that are the protagonists of the Arab Spring and the Islamic factions fighting each other,? he said.

At the same time, Greiche hinted at the delicate balancing act awaiting the pope ? expressing sympathy for wounded Muslim sensitivities, while also rejecting extremism and defending his own flock. While Egyptian Muslims are up in arms about an obscure American film, Greiche said, no one is objecting to what he described as routine ?insults and attacks against Christians? in Egyptian media controlled by Muslim groups.

Certainly, there are a number of ways for things to go haywire during the pope?s three days in Lebanon, beginning with the possibility of a security breach. The country?s Interior Minister, Marwan Charbel, told reporters yesterday that the army and the Presidential Guard have been mobilized along with the regular police to provide extra protection.

There?s also the risk of politically incendiary rhetoric -- perhaps not so much from the pope himself, who has largely avoided such drama since a Sept. 2006 speech in Regensburg, Germany, that inflamed Muslim sentiments by appearing to link Muhammad to violence -- but from the people with whom he'll share platforms.

Tomorrow, for instance, Benedict will be welcomed to Beirut?s Greek Melkite Basilica by Patriarch Gregorios III Laham, who already created a minor incident when an advance text of his welcoming address mysteriously appeared on-line last week. In it, Laham was set to ask Benedict to recognize Palestine, ahead of an expected push for recognition at the United Nations General Assembly later this month.

In general, Christian leaders of the Middle East, most of whom are themselves Arabs, tend to be vocally supportive of the Palestinian cause. Laham?s text was taken down shortly after it appeared, and Lombardi later said it?s pointless to speculate about a welcoming address two weeks before it?s given.

Officially, the Vatican?s diplomatic line favors a negotiated path towards a two-state settlement to the Israeli/Palestinian conflict, avoiding ?unilateral gestures? on either side. If Laham or someone else raises the issue, it could force Vatican spokespersons to engage it, potentially creating a distracting side-show.

In the end, if Benedict stays safe for the next three days, avoids fresh controversy, and is basically well-received, that by itself could offer important symbolism, especially in the context of recent events.

The formal purpose for the trip is for Benedict to present a lengthy document, called an ?Apostolic Exhortation,? offering the conclusions of a Synod of Bishops on the Middle East in Rome in 2010. Titled

?Ecclesia in the Middle East,? the document will be signed by the pope in the Greek Melkite Basilica of St. Paul.

[John Allen is *NCR*'s senior correspondent, and is in Rome this week. Check back to ***NCR* Today** **[1]** throughout for his dispatches from the Vatican.]

Source URL (retrieved on *07/30/2016 - 16:42*): https://www.ncronline.org/blogs/ncr-today/world-brink-can-benedict-be-firebreak

Links:
[1] http://ncronline.org/blogs/ncr-today