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Muslims want Christians in Middle East, mufti tells pope

by John L. Allen Jr.

NCR Today

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Beirut

¶ Though everyone expected that Benedict XVI, while he was in the neighborhood, would express a preference that Christians not abandon the Middle East, the same point has now been made by one of his opposite numbers on the Muslim side.

¶ In a meeting this morning with the pope, Mufti Mohammad Rachid Kabbani, whose title is "Mufti of the Lebanese Republic," told Benedict that Muslims "absolutely do not want Christians to leave the Middle East," according to Jesuit Fr. Federico Lombardi, the Vatican spokesperson.

¶ Benedict's meeting this morning with leaders of Lebanon's four main branches of Islam — Sunni, Shi'ite, Druze and Alawit — took place behind closed doors at Beirut's Presidential Palace, but Lombardi briefed reporters afterwards on its high points.

¶ According to Lombardi, the mufti also expressed appreciation for a recent Vatican statement expressing sympathy for Muslims offended by a recent obscure American film attacking Islam, which has been cited as a pretext for the anti-American violence spreading across the Islamic world.

¶ That statement, issued last week, came under fire from critics who saw it as almost excusing the attacks in Libya which led to the death of the U.S. ambassador and other American personnel. A day later the Vatican issued another statement clearly condemning those attacks.

¶ Finally, according to Lombardi, the mufti also praised a recent comment by Patriarch Béchara Boutros Raï, leader of Lebanon's Maronite church, that Christians and Muslims need to move beyond "co-

existence? toward ?genuine communion and unity.?

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