

Red carpet but little warmth for pope in Israel

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Israelis ambivalent about Benedict after backing Nazi-era pontiff, lifting excommunication of Holocaust-denier.

TEL AVIV - Israel rolls out the red carpet for Pope Benedict XVI next week, but the German pontiff is unlikely to receive the warm greeting.

The pontiff arrives in Israel from Jordan on May 11 for a five-day pilgrimage that will see him follow in the footsteps of Jesus and visit Jewish and Muslim holy sites in Israel and the occupied Palestinian territories (East Jerusalem and the West Bank).

He will meet senior Israeli and Palestinian leaders, top Christian, Jewish and Muslim religious officials, and Palestinian refugees living near the spot where Jesus is believed to have been born in a Bethlehem stable.

His trip is a mainly pastoral visit aimed at encouraging the dwindling Christian population to stay in the Holy Land, as well as promoting peace and inter-religious dialogue in a conflict-ridden region sacred to the world's three main monotheistic religions.

The Church laments the difficult conditions endured by Christians in Israel.

Most of them Arab, they make up some two percent of Israel's population of some seven million.

Many are simply leaving the country, prompting fears that the Catholic presence will virtually evaporate from the cradle of Christianity.

Israel is hoping the tour by the pope and thousands of accompanying pilgrims will further boost the number of Christian visitors, that has steadily grown over the past three years to nearly 1.8 million in 2008 -- representing almost two thirds of all tourists to Israel.

But the enthusiasm that greeted Pope John Paul II's trip in 2000 -- the first by a pontiff since Israel and the Vatican established diplomatic ties in 1993 -- is missing this time around.

Israelis are ambivalent about the German pope who was a member of the Hitler Youth and has stirred controversy by backing beatification of a controversial Nazi-era pontiff and lifting the excommunication of a Holocaust-denying British bishop.

"It's slightly less positive because of the personality of the pope himself," says Yaacov Katz, a professor at Bar-Ilan University. "People are suspicious of his motives. They think he's hardline... conservative."

Benedict unleashed a torrent of criticism in January when he lifted the excommunication of British bishop Richard Williamson and three other ultra-conservative bishops in what he called a "discreet gesture of mercy."

In the wake of the outrage over the Holocaust denying bishop, it was "intolerable and altogether unacceptable" to deny the genocide, said Rabbi David Rosen, chairman of the International Jewish Committee on Inter-religious Consultations.

In October, Benedict also stirred unease among Jewish groups when he defended the beatification of Pope Pius XII who has been accused of turning a blind eye to the Nazi atrocities during World War II.

He later placed the sainthood dossier on hold, saying the process would have to wait six or seven years until sealed archive material on Pius's wartime years became available.

Coupled with Benedict's German origins and his membership of the Hitler Youth -- he has said he was enrolled against his will after membership became compulsory in 1941 -- these incidents have created concern in the Jewish community.

"There is a lot of dissatisfaction with the fact that he tried to rehabilitate Bishop Williamson," Katz said, adding that the pope's German origins were "held against him as not being sensitive to the feelings of the Jewish religion."

But such unease is unjustified, argue some.

Christians in the Holy Land are divided on the pope's visit in the wake of Israel's deadly war on Gaza in December-January, with many urging the pontiff to stay away in protest at the offensive.

"We want the pope to come, but the timing is problematic because of the Gaza war where many Palestinians were killed," said Bassam Shahtoot, a member of the Nazareth Roman Catholic parish council. "Some people are using this visit politically" to polish Israel's image.

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