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SUBJECT: HOLY SEE: POPE'S REGENSBURG SPEECH IGNITES FIRESTORM, LEADS
TO PAPAL APOLOGY

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REASON: 1.4 (d)

¶1. (C) Summary. Pope Benedict XVI's September 12 speech in Regensburg caused an unwanted firestorm in the Islamic world because of the pope's quoting, in passing, an insulting reference made by a 14th-century Byzantine emperor. The Holy See, and the pope himself, responded with statements of

clarification and regret in the ensuing days. While the pope surely did not intend such an outcome, his own approach toward Islam and toward interreligious dialogue is cooler than that of his predecessor. Post expects further papal comments on the matter on September 20, unless the controversy has died down by then, and will report further in the coming days. End summary.

¶2. (C) During his recent visit to Germany, Pope Benedict XVI gave a lecture to a gathering of academics on September 12 at the University of Regensburg. The lecture, entitled "Faith, Reason and the University: Memories and Reflections", fairly long at roughly 3800 words, was of a learned sort, and focused on the relationship of reason and faith in the Western world. At the outset of his remarks, the pope cited a comment made by a 14th century Byzantine emperor, Manuel II Paleologus, in order to make the point that proselytizing by violence is unacceptable to Christians, if not necessarily to Muslims. The actual quotation included a stinging reference to the prophet Mohammed. This reference, a very small part of the lecture, subsequently produced an inflamed reaction in the Muslim world, several contrite statements from Rome, and considerable commentary. In order to shed some light on this unexpected controversy, this cable takes a look at what the pope said, the reactions it produced, and our interpretation of the situation.

What the Pope Said

¶3. (U) Following a bit of personal reminiscence about his own university days, the pope embarked on the lecture with the following passage:

"I was reminded of all this recently, when I read the edition by Professor Theodore Khoury (Munster) of part of the dialogue

carried on -- perhaps in 1391 in the winter barracks near Ankara -- by the erudite Byzantine emperor Manuel II Paleologus and an educated Persian on the subject of Christianity and Islam, and the truth of both. It was probably the emperor himself who set down this dialogue, during the siege of Constantinople between 1394 and 1402; and this would explain why his arguments are given in greater detail than the responses of the learned Persian. The dialogue ranges widely over the structures of faith contained in the Bible and in the Qur'an, and deals especially with the image of God and of man, while necessarily returning repeatedly to the relationship of the three Laws: the Old Testament, the New Testament, and the Qur'an. In this lecture I would like to discuss only one point -- itself rather marginal to the dialogue itself -- which, in the context of faith and reason, I found interesting and which can serve as the starting-point for my reflections on the issue.

"In the seventh conversation edited by Professor Khoury, the emperor touches on the theme of the jihad (holy war). The emperor must have known that surah 2, 256 reads: There is no compulsion in religion. It is one of the suras of the early period, when Mohammed was still powerless and under threat. But naturally the emperor also knew the instructions, developed later and recorded in the Qur'an, concerning holy war. Without descending to details, such as the difference in treatment accorded to those who have the "Book" and the "infidels", he turns to his interlocutor somewhat brusquely with the central question on the relationship between religion and violence in general, in these words: "Show me just what Mohammed brought that was new, and there you will find things only evil and inhuman, such as his command to spread by the sword the faith he preached." The emperor goes on to explain in detail the reasons why spreading the faith through violence is something unreasonable. Violence is incompatible with the nature of God and the nature of the soul. God is not pleased by blood, and not acting reasonably is contrary to God's nature. Faith is

born of the soul, not the body. Whoever would lead someone to faith needs the ability to speak well and to reason properly, without violence and threats.... To convince a reasonable soul, one does not need a strong arm, or weapons of any kind, or any other means of threatening a person with death...."

¶4. (U) The remainder of the lecture says very little about Islam

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(except for a passage suggesting that Muslims differ from Christians in their willingness to accept God as absolutely transcending reason) and focuses instead on ancient Greek philosophy, Medieval Christian scholarship, and modern European thinking about the relationship of faith and reason. It concludes with an echo of the Manuel quotation to affirm that reason and faith can and must go together.

Reactions

¶5. (SBU) The lecture received substantial media coverage. By September 14 criticism had been heard from various Muslim authorities; this criticism intensified in the following days. According to press reports, the president of Turkey's Religious Affairs Directorate, Ali Bardakoglu, said he read the pope's speech with amazement and horror, and he considered it to be provocative, hostile, prejudicial, and a barrage of other uncomplimentary terms. Aiman Mazyek, Secretary-General of the Central Council of Muslims in Germany, and Dalil Boubakeur, head of the French Council for the Muslim Religion, were also quick to express concern. Senior Islamic officials in Kuwait, Egypt, and Pakistan called for an apology. Other prominent Muslims, such as Indonesian President Susilo and former Iranian President

Khatami, called for caution and hoped for clarification. Most recently, al-Qaeda militants in Iraq have reportedly vowed war on "worshippers of the cross" in reaction to the papal remarks. In Somalia, gunmen shot an Italian nun, but it is not clear that the attack was related to the papal statement.

¶6. (U) The Turkish government has so far resisted calls to postpone or cancel the Pope's planned November visit to Istanbul. The Moroccan government recalled its ambassador to the Holy See for consultations.

¶7. (U) The Vatican responded later on September 14 with a statement from Father Federico Lombardi, the Holy See's spokesman. Lombardi said it was certainly not the pope's intention to offend the sensibilities of Muslim believers, and went on to emphasize that the pope wants to cultivate an attitude of respect and dialogue toward other religions and cultures, "obviously also toward Islam".

¶8. (SBU) On September 16, the newly-installed Secretary of State, Cardinal Tarcisio Bertone, issued an additional statement. Bertone noted the reaction in Muslim quarters to the pope's remarks, as well as the clarifications and explanations already presented by the director of the Holy See press office (Lombardi). Bertone said the pope:

(a) has a view of Islam which is unequivocally that expressed in "Nostra Aetate" -- a seminal Vatican II document on interfaith relations -- i.e., that the Church regards Muslims with esteem (for their reverence for Jesus and Mary, their monotheism, their obedience to God, etc.).

(b) strongly favors interreligious and intercultural dialogue

(c) did not mean to imply that he shares the views of Manuel II which he quoted in his remarks

(d) "sincerely regrets that certain passages of his address could have sounded offensive to the sensitivities of the Muslim faithful, and (could have been) interpreted in a manner that in no way corresponds to his intentions."

(e) hopes Muslims "will be helped" to understand the correct meaning of his words in the interests of faith, peace, and justice.

¶9. (SBU) Bertone gave an interview on September 17 in which he said that papal nuncios had been asked to explain the pope's remarks in their host countries. Bertone criticized the media for its role in the crisis, and said the pope's words had been "seriously manipulated". Cardinal Renato Martino, head of the Holy See's influential Justice and Peace dicastery, wrote a front-page article in L'Osservatore Romano on September 17, in which he blamed the controversy on mass media distortions and "orchestrated political and ideological exploitation". Martino said, rather awkwardly, that if some believers from another religion feel offended, they should know that the pope's desire is to inspire sentiments of respect and Christian friendship for all true adherents of other religions. Other prominent Catholics around the world, such as British Cardinal Murphy-O'Connor, also came to the pope's defense.

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The Pope's Regrets

¶10. (U) At his weekly Angelus address on Sunday, September 17,

Pope Benedict XVI himself spoke to the issue, albeit briefly. Speaking in Castelgandolfo, and making his first public remarks since returning from Germany, he said "I am deeply sorry for the reactions in some countries to a few passages of my address at the University of Regensburg, which were considered offensive to the sensibility of Muslims. These in fact were a quotation from a medieval text, which do not in any way express my personal thought. Yesterday the Cardinal Secretary of State published a statement in this regard in which he explained the true meaning of my words. I hope that this serves to appease hearts and to clarify the true meaning of my address, which in its totality was and is an invitation to frank and sincere dialogue, with great mutual respect."

Comment

¶11. (C) Charge d'affaires has appointments pending with Holy See officials and others, and will report the results of those conversations as soon as possible. We will also be sending in a summary of relevant media coverage.

¶12. (C) For the moment, it is clear that Pope Benedict XVI has created an unwanted controversy with potentially significant, and harmful, implications. A common view is that the pope, a studious and retiring academic by nature, simply didn't imagine that his historical reference could cause such heartburn. While defenders have blamed the media, or trouble-seeking Muslims, others have noted that the firestorm could easily have been foreseen, and forestalled, had the pope circulated his text in advance to his deputies. (A powerful intellect long accustomed to writing his own material, Benedict is not in the habit of having his material vetted.)

¶13. (C) On the other hand, it taxes the imagination in today's world to suppose that a reference -- by the pope! -- to the Prophet Mohammed's innovations as "evil and inhuman" would pass unnoticed. Nor is it likely that the particular quotation is accidental. Benedict is known for his meticulous ways, and also for his distinctly cooler (compared to John Paul II) approach toward Islam and interreligious dialogue. The pope is preparing for an important visit to Istanbul in November. His invocation of Manuel, an emperor whose life was defined in combat with the Ottomans who destroyed his empire a few decades later, must have been deliberate. So, too, the decision to quote the precise words of Manuel -- rather than a milder paraphrase -- is significant in a pope known for his belief that one must neither compromise with the truth, nor back down from defending the faith. (As Cardinal Ratzinger, he was also known for his belief that Turkey should not enter the European Union.) One of the pope's hardline Italian supporters, journalist Sandro Magister, argued in a September 18 column that Benedict has deliberately chosen a path of "less diplomacy and more Gospel", with marked willingness to say politically incorrect things.

¶14. (C) Our view is that Benedict very likely chose his words carefully and was not averse to having them interpreted as a sign of his skepticism about Islam; his earlier actions, such as the transfer of Archbishop Michael Fitzgerald last spring, made this attitude clear enough. However, he surely did not intend for them to lead to violence or a worsening of tensions between Christians and Muslims. The quick succession of mollifying remarks by senior Vatican officials, including the pope, is unusual and suggests a chastened feeling at the top. However, the actual "apology" is itself phrased rather carefully and may fall short of putting out the fire. Upon return from a trip, popes customarily reflect upon the trip at the next public opportunity; in this case, that means the Wednesday audience on September 20. We will watch developments closely.

¶15. (C) From our perspective, any USG comments on the matter should carefully note the Holy See's own statements, particularly the Pope's own comments confirming that his remarks have been misunderstood and dissociating himself from Manuel's words about the prophet. Cardinal Bertone's clarification of the Holy See's continuing dedication to the principles of Nostra Aetate (see para 8) and deep respect for Islam should also be noted.

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