



## Pope Rage in Istanbul

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Pope Benedict XVI is set to arrive in Turkey on Tuesday, and tensions are running high. Mehmet Ali Agca, the Turk who shot Pope John Paul II in 1981, [wrote to Benedict](#): “Your life is in danger. You absolutely must not come to Turkey.” And [several weeks ago](#), a Turk named Ibrahim Ak stood outside Italy’s consulate in Istanbul and fired a gun while proclaiming his desire to strangle the pope. As he was arrested, [Ak shouted](#): “I am happy to be a Muslim!” He said that he hoped the Pope would decide not to come to Turkey, and that his actions would inspire other Turks to violence: “God willing, this will be a spark, a starter for Muslims ... God willing, he will not come. If he comes, he will see what will happen to him.”

Turkish officials are trying to make sure nothing does. According to the [Associated Press](#), they have “mobilized an army of snipers, bomb disposal experts and riot police, as well as navy commandos to patrol the Bosphorus Straits flowing through Istanbul.” However, Meliha Benli Altunisik, a professor at the Middle East Technical University in Ankara, [questioned](#) whether such precautions were necessary at all: “Will there be protests? Yes, of course. But I cannot take seriously the notion that he is in physical danger. He will rather be ignored.”

Certainly Turkish Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan originally planned to ignore him. Erdogan will be attending a NATO summit in Latvia on the first two days of the Pope’s visit and at first announced that he would not meet with him

during the last two days, either. "You can't expect me to arrange my timetable according to the pope," [Erdogan huffed](#), and of course he's right: how could anyone expect him to rearrange his busy schedule to meet with someone so unimportant as the Pope? (However, on Monday he did finally change his plans and [agreed to meet with Benedict](#).)

The real reason why Erdogan did not want to meet the Pope, of course, is the same reason why security is so tight: Turks are enraged over the [Pope's speech](#) at the University of Regensburg on September 12, 2006, in which he quoted the fourteenth century Byzantine Emperor Manuel II Paleologos: "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." There were riots all over the Islamic world over these remarks in September, and several Christians were murdered in Iraq and Somalia. In Turkey, tempers haven't cooled. Turkish politician [Salih Kapusuz said](#): "The owner of those unfortunate and arrogant comments, Benedict XVI, has gone down in history, but in the same category as Hitler and Mussolini....It looks like an effort to revive the mentality of the Crusades." The Crusades were on Al-Qaeda leader Ayman Al-Zawahri's mind also: [he likened Benedict to Pope Urban II](#), who called the First Crusade in 1095.

Unfortunately, the danger of and anger over the Pope's visit to Turkey has overshadowed both the real

focus of the visit, and what should be its major preoccupation. The main purpose of the Pope's trip is to meet with the Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew, spiritual leader of the Orthodox Church. One may hope also that the Pope will take an opportunity to shed some light upon the woeful condition of religious minorities, principally Christians, in what is nominally a secular state that allows for religious freedom. Two converts from Islam to Christianity, Hakan Tastan and Turan Topal, [are currently on trial](#) on charges of "insulting 'Turkishness'" and inciting hatred of Islam. What seems to be behind the charges is that Tastan and Topal were proselytizing – which, while [not officially illegal](#), is frowned upon and has sometimes resulted in beatings of Christians trying to hand out religious literature. On November 4, [a Protestant church in western Turkey was fire-bombed](#), after months of harassment that was ignored by Turkish authorities. The murderer of a Catholic priest, Fr. Andrea Santoro, last February in the Turkish city of Trabzon [was recently sentenced](#) to only eighteen years in prison. (The killer shouted "Allahu akbar!" as he fired shots at the priest.)

All this bespeaks a Turkish officialdom that is hostile – at best – to non-Muslim forms of religious expression, Turkey's guarantees of religious freedom be damned. The institutionalized subjugation and second-class status of religious minorities under the Ottoman Empire was bad enough, but Turkish secularism has been, if anything, even worse. Constantinople was 50% Christian

as recently as 1914 (its name was changed to Istanbul in 1930); today, it is less than one percent Christian. The Catholic Church has no legal recognition; Catholic churches, like other churches, remain inconspicuous so as not to draw the angry attention of mujahedin. Even the recognized Churches [are not allowed](#) to operated seminaries or build new houses of worship – in accord with ancient Islamic Sharia restrictions on non-Muslims in an Islamic state, which restrictions paradoxically enough still have at least some force in secular Turkey.

The righteous fury with which the Pope will likely be greeted in Turkey will shift attention from the shame Turkish authorities should feel over the mistreatment of Christians in their land that nominally allows for religious freedom. The mainstream media will focus on protests against the Pope, and pay scant attention to anything he may say, if he says anything at all, about the oppression of Christians in Turkey. And that, in the final analysis, may lead the Turkish government – for all its security precautions -- to hope that the protestors will turn out in force.

*Robert Spencer is a scholar of Islamic history, theology, and law and the director of [Jihad Watch](#). He is the author of five books, seven monographs, and hundreds of articles about jihad and Islamic terrorism, including [Islam Unveiled: Disturbing Questions About the World's Fastest Growing Faith](#) and [The Politically Incorrect Guide to Islam \(and the Crusades\)](#). He is also an Adjunct Fellow with the Free Congress Foundation.*