

Jewish leaders decry Pope Francis's criticism of Israel as 'incendiary'

by [Yonat Shimron](#)

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Pope Francis gives the annual Christmas address to the Roman Curia, December 21, 2024, at the Vatican. (Video screengrab)

A group representing the leaders of the United States's largest Jewish organizations has written [a letter](#) to Pope Francis criticizing his recent [condemnation](#) of Israeli airstrikes that killed 25 Palestinians, calling the pope's comments "incendiary."

In his December 21 Christmas address to the Catholic Church's cardinals, Francis said: "Yesterday, children were bombed. This is cruelty. This is not war."

The letter, from the Conference of Presidents of Major American Jewish Organizations, defended Israel's war in Gaza as a "legitimate military campaign."

The conference's mission, [according to its website](#), is to “advance the U.S.-Israel special relationship, bolster Israel's security and prosperity.”

The conference represents the heads of 53 US Jewish organizations, including the Jewish Federations of North America, Hillel International, the Anti-Defamation League, and the American Jewish Committee.

“With global antisemitism at record highs, the American Jewish community calls on you to refrain from making incendiary comments and to build bridges between our two peoples,” said the letter, which was signed by William C. Daroff, the group's CEO, as well as Harriet P. Schleifer, its chair.

The letter argues that the pope's comments do not “acknowledge Israel's right to defend itself in the aftermath of the October 7 massacre where Hamas terrorists murdered 1,200 innocent civilians and took 251 hostages, 101 of whom still remain captive. Further, it does not acknowledge Hamas' use of human shields and civilian infrastructure for terror purposes, putting the entire population of Gaza at risk.” (The *New York Times* has [reported](#) that the Israeli army has used Palestinians as human shields, a practice that is illegal under international law.)

Israel's Foreign Ministry also [criticized](#) the pope's comments, calling them “particularly disappointing as they are disconnected from the true and factual context of Israel's fight against jihadist terrorism—a multi-front war that was forced upon it starting on October 7.”

In a book excerpt published last month in the Italian press, Francis was quoted as calling for an [investigation](#) to determine if Israel's attacks in Gaza constitute genocide. He had earlier made statements that called the Israeli military action “immoral.”

Israel's retaliatory war in Gaza, which to date has killed [45,000 Palestinians](#) and wounded 106,000, has come under international condemnation. More than half of the fatalities have been women and children, according to Palestinian health officials. The overwhelming bombing campaign has flattened the coastal strip and left 2 million residents, mostly refugees, homeless, starving, and sick.

Earlier in December, Amnesty International became the first major international human rights organization to accuse Israel of carrying out [genocide](#) in Gaza, a charge many international genocide scholars agree on. Last year, South Africa brought a charge of genocide against Israel in the International Criminal Court,

which the court is still [examining](#). —Religion News Service