
Impact from the Papal Visit to Iraq? Necessary Conditions and Practical Steps

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The first-ever Papal visit to Iraq on March 5-8, 2021 was largely met with celebration as he pursued a mission of solidarity with persecuted Christians and other minorities and sought to elevate a mission of tolerance and coexistence among Christians and Muslims in Iraq, the Middle East and around the globe. The trip was replete with symbolism from the historic meeting with Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani, to an interfaith gathering in Ur, to prayer services amongst the ruins of Mosul, the reviving community of Qaraqosh, and high-level delegations in Baghdad and Erbil, and overwhelmingly positive receptions by crowds along the way.

Yet for the celebrations to translate into meaningful changes will require far more than symbolic gestures. The security situation remains fraught, justice for genocide survivors has been limited, meaningful political representation for all Iraqis is still in question, and the unequal economic opportunities and basic services have inspired waves of protests in recent months.

In this [Cornerstone Forum series](#), contributors were asked to consider: Does the Pope's visit provide an opportunity for meaningful steps to be taken? What practical steps could be taken to translate the goodwill of the Pope's visit into tangible progress in addressing the fundamental issues impacting Iraqis of all religious communities? What roles should international NGOs, religious actors, and multi-lateral organizations take to support positive developments for a more just and flourishing society?

Indeed, Pope Francis' visit to Iraq is very important for both the country and for the region.

Before I offer some thoughts on why the trip is so important and what I hope can be achieved during the trip, let me offer some general context for the conditions necessary to advance societal peace and social and political harmony.

What is absolutely necessary for human flourishing and societal peace and stability?

First, a recognition that human beings are innately religious.

We as human beings ask ultimate questions about what is true, what will give our lives meaning, and what obligations we have to God.

This is why religious freedom is so important, because it recognizes that each of us has an obligation to God to seek him and to live our lives, including in public, in ways which are faithful to our sense of what our religious convictions require.

Second, human flourishing and societal stability requires a recognition that we as human beings are diverse.

Not just that we belong to different religious traditions, but within our religious traditions there can be significant differences, between Catholics and Protestants, between Sunni and Shia, for example, and between believers and non-believers. There are also ethnic and national differences which are significant.

Third, a recognition that God has clearly created a world in which diversity in all its rich variety is allowed, that we as human beings are expected to contend with each other in pursuit of truth and “the good.”

We must, in other words, remain committed to the idea that there is an objective truth about God, and about what is good and what is evil. Our job is to support each other in the pursuit of that truth.

The challenge that we face in Iraq, the Middle East, and much of the world, is that societal peace and stability are often absent, and as a result, human beings do not flourish. People suffer, and die, and do not live in peace and stability.

In recent decades, Iraq has been torn apart by sectarian violence and political instability. The results have been particularly devastating for Iraq’s ethnic and religious minorities. The tension between ethnic and religious groups, both small and large, has been greatly increased.

Whenever there is political and cultural instability, there is fertile ground for outsiders to intervene in a country’s internal affairs, which invariably will make the instability grow. In places like the Nineveh, that outside interference has compromised significantly the safety of Iraqi ethnic and religious minorities.

It is into such an environment that Pope Francis is coming to Iraq, and the big question is: Can the Pope’s visit be of any help? And, what might be the best results we can imagine which might emerge from the trip?

The stated objectives of the trip are: firstly, to encourage the Christian communities in the country which have been decimated by ISIS and other violence and, secondly, to pursue high-level Muslim-Christian dialogue to promote tolerance between religious communities.

In the words of one of the most experienced Vatican observers, [John Allen](#), “Pope Francis knows that there is no Christian community anywhere in the world that has paid a greater price in blood for the faith than the Christian community of Iraq.”

Iraqi leadership is on record as affirming the importance of Iraq's rich diversity. The Iraqi Ambassador to the United States, Fareed Yasseen, often [has said](#) that: "Iraq is not Iraq without its minorities."

In January, Iraqi President Barham Salih, in a [meeting](#) with Pope Francis, discussed the importance of "preserving the historical presence of Christians in the country," including "highlighting the need to guarantee their security and a place in the future of Iraq."

The problem, of course, is to translate verbal assurances of the rights of religious and ethnic minorities into concrete protections. Protections are needed against ISIS sympathizers, on one hand, and, on the other, the sectarian militias which have consistently harassed Christian and Yazidi minorities in the Nineveh Plains and elsewhere.

Why the Pope's visit can make a difference

First, because theology matters.

We all know that religion can be a force for good or evil in the world, depending on what religious leaders and followers call for. Do they support: understanding or division? judgment or mercy? affirming "the other" or denigrating "the other"? peace or violence?

On March 6, Pope Francis traveled south from Baghdad to Najaf for a private meeting with Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani, one of the world's most influential Shiite Muslim clerics – a visit that Senior Undersecretary of Iraq's Ministry of Foreign Affairs Nizar Al-Khair Allah has accurately called "historic."

The very fact that Pope Francis and Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani met together sends a powerful message of hope and goodwill to the nation.

When people see religious leaders from different religious traditions *together* affirming common values, and condemning extremists who divide and promote hate, it can be a very powerful incentive for societal change and the promotion of peace.

Second, if "practical" steps can be discussed and taken which advance policies which will make more likely the emergence of peace and stability, a society of equality and religious freedom, where all will be free to be faithful to God and conscience, the Pope's visit can, indeed, make a positive difference.

What might those practical steps look like? Here are a few examples:

Example #1: Advance security for Christians and other religious and ethnic minorities

It is imperative that Pope Francis not only promote inter-religious cooperation, but that he also address the specific security and political factors that imperil Iraq's religious minorities.

As Knox Thames, former special adviser for religious minorities at the U.S. Department of State, has [recently commented](#): “...it will be hard to overcome the sense of foreboding and vulnerability that plagues the efforts to return Christians and other religious minorities like Yazidis to their homelands. Iraq’s religious minorities live in a security vacuum. Even though IS was pushed out of northern Iraq, the central government has struggled to regain control, leaving minority areas exposed to violence from IS sympathizers and various militias such as the Hashd al-Sha’bi. [...] Security is the most important obstacle to reviving minority religious life and the hardest to address. Minorities must play a role in their own protection.”

Religious minorities that were left vulnerable and exposed in 2014, have repeatedly expressed the desire to have representation in their own security, from the local police force to the security files in their regions. There is a need for greater representation, training, and equipping of these communities.

Example #2: Discuss the development of educational and theological curriculum which advances societal harmony and the “common good,” while at the same rejecting extremist, harmful, and heretical religious and political ideas.

Already there are initiatives underway with universities, religious leaders, NGOs and others to continue to inculcate principles of religious freedom and meaningful pluralism.

The Catholic University of Erbil and the Alliance of Iraqi Minorities are advising on [new curriculum](#) that is being drafted for both Baghdad and Erbil.

The Coalition for Religious Equality and Inclusive Development (CREID) has brought together [high-level stakeholders and grassroots activists](#) to develop and promote buy-in for a good pro-pluralism religious education curriculum.

Example #3: Discuss ways to enshrine in law protections for all citizens, including religious freedom, and discuss how to ensure such laws are honored and that there is a culture present which appreciates the spirit of such laws.

There are important religious freedom issues that impact all Iraqis, including the National Identity Card Law (particularly for Baha’i and converts), registrations of houses of worship, and more. As Knox Thames has [noted](#): “there are lower-profile changes Francis can press for. Non-Muslims have voiced concern about a section of the National Identity Card Law that recognizes a citizen’s conversion to Islam from another faith, but not the reverse.”

Additionally, for survivors of the ISIS genocide, addressing the longstanding issues of justice and accountability, through legislation, prosecution, and even the dignified treatment of mass graves, are all important steps to rebuilding a social fabric that supports the rights of all Iraqis.

Example #4: Discuss concrete ways to impact the understanding of all Iraqis relative to the values which will make most likely the spread of humanity-affirming attitudes and policies.

Such a strategy will almost certainly involve social media, publications, movies, etc. This will likely require, “engaging leaders, training journalists and equipping civil society activists with media literacy” that enables them to [counter incendiary rhetoric](#).

Example #5: *Create on-going interreligious initiatives to work on the practical steps discussed to promote societal flourishing.*

These could include initiatives such as the Iraq Religious Freedom and Anti-discrimination Roundtable, which is helping to coordinate actions across Iraq’s religious landscape and address [misunderstandings of the meaning and value](#) of religious freedom. These initiatives can combine bottom-up grassroots efforts and top-down changes to policy and practice to bring about meaningful reform.

Conclusion

In short, the historic three-day visit of Pope Francis to Iraq beginning on March 5 can pay rich dividends to the people of Iraq, the region, and the world, but none of this would be possible apart from the warm welcome the government of Iraq has promised and the willingness to meet with the Pope of eminent clerics such as the important spiritual leader of Iraq -- Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani.

Pope Francis’ visit should serve not only as a sign of solidarity with suffering communities, but as an opportunity to speak boldly and call for changes in law and society that will undercut the forces of extremism and violence that have cost Iraq so much.

**Note: A version of this article was presented at an [online event](#) co-hosted by Al-Rafidain Center for Dialogue and the Religious Freedom Institute on March 1, 2021.*

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