
What Are the Indications and Repercussions that Accompanied Pope Francis' Visit to Iraq?

Tech4Peace

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?

Pope Francis' visit to Iraq was historical as he is the first pontiff to visit Iraq. It was an old dream of his predecessor Pope John Paul II, in 2000, for a papal visit to Mesopotamia with the aim of the pilgrimage to the birthplace of the Prophet Abraham. Also, it is the first travel of Pope Francis outside the Vatican walls since the outbreak of Coronavirus in the world. All the obstacles, such as the security and health concerns, didn't prevent him from completing his visit, even despite the papal ambassador to Iraq, Mitja Leskovar, contracting the Coronavirus.

The historic papal visit to Iraq was arranged following the invitations from the Iraqi church personalities and the President of the Republic of Iraq, Mr. Barham Salih.

One of the reasons it is called a historic visit was because of the meeting that brought together Pope Francis with a supreme religious leader in Iraq. Despite the exchange of various messages between

Najaf and the Vatican, this visit remains the first of its type for the chief pontiff to meet with a Shiite Islamic religious figure of this level.

The meeting itself was a historical one and sent a humanitarian message to all the peoples who followed the event that regardless of the differences in a person's beliefs in religion, sect, shared humanity remains the factor that always wins. All these signs were evident during the meeting that was broadcast globally, and signs of harmony were apparent on the face of the religious leaders, Ali al-Sistani and Pope Francis, during the last handshake between them.

Seeking peace and rapprochement between peoples and religions were central reasons for this visit. This remains an urgent need for the Iraqi people, especially amidst the circumstances of what Iraqis have faced from 2003 until today. They have seen increased divisions and deterioration in all levels of political, security, health, and services from which all Iraqis have suffered. These factors have delayed progress that Iraqis were aspiring for through the change of successive regimes over previous generations.

In addition, the Pope's visit provided moral and spiritual support for the hearts of the Christian component in Iraq, as they have suffered persecution over the years. The Christian sects in Iraq, including Chaldeans, Syriacs, and Assyrians, are among the oldest churches in Iraq and the whole world. Yet they were victims of persecution and displacement, especially when the ISIS terrorist group controlled many parts of Iraq, including the city of Mosul, where a large part of the Christians reside and in the towns around it.

The eyes of the world were on Iraq during the visit of Pope Francis. TV stations in most countries of the world, newspapers, and news websites were covering the details of the visit moment by moment, which is a positive message for Iraq and Iraqis to pay attention again to the glories Iraq, but in a different way and far away from political or partisan conflicts or security deterioration. Delightfully it was clear for all to see the level of preparation and the reception and the joy that was painted on the faces of the Iraqis who were present at the reception or who watched the event on live TV.

The reception that Pope Francis and his accompanying delegation of clerics and journalists received was befitting him and befitting Iraq. From the moment the Air Alitalia flight landed at Baghdad International Airport, he was greeted by children with different costumes with a big smile on their faces and folk music that represented all the sects and components of the Iraqi people. It was a message to the Pope and his accompanying delegation that this is an Iraq made up of different components and is proud of its cultures, and they were all standing together to welcome their guest.

The Iraqi people were surprised by their government for many reasons, which also raised many questions. The first surprise was that the Iraqi government showed it is capable of bringing about change, even if it is limited to the streets designated for crossing Pope Francis or the areas that he was to visit. So why do they not change the reality for their people?

In a matter of a few days, roads were paved with asphalt, squares were decorated, walls were painted, streets were washed, and dark areas lit up. So here, the Iraqis had a question. If the Iraqi government

was able to make a difference and change for the better within days to receive the Pope's historic visit, why did it not take these comprehensive measures for the people over the past years?

Visiting Mosul was very important. The location chosen for the event was very successful as it showed the whole world the extent of the destruction caused by the ISIS terrorist group over the years of its complete control of the city. You could see clearly the physical destruction of the city and its infrastructure and feel the psychological impact left in the hearts of the city's residents. Those who visit the city will witness firsthand the extent of the devastation that came as a result of the disaster that befell the city and the human losses that its residents experienced.

The role of local and international organizations, youth groups, decision-makers, and religious institutions must be complementary to Pope Francis' visit. As the extent of the destruction was clear and direct, now the reaction of the people who respect the other and want to live in peace, a visible sentiment during the papal visit, must be translated into actions.

At the international level, the vision was clear that these cities and the entire country want to move forward. The Governor of Nineveh, Najm al-Jubouri, and the previous deputy of Parliament, Khalis Ishush, were quoted as saying that many countries, nearly thirty, contacted him and made their offer to help in the reconstruction of Mosul. The plan already exists for reconstruction, but what slows down the progress is the material and economic shortage. Support to address these needs for this is one of the significant results of the Pope's visit to Iraq.

His tour of the city of Mosul, walking amid the devastation, drew attention to the amount of destruction in the city. The offer of countries to help was a start. Now it is the role of the state and NGOs to work on rehabilitation, planting the seed of peace, educating and developing the skills of citizens to overcome the difficulties facing the people in these critical times. This can be done with the help of youth teams that have proven their worth and determination to remove the rubble in the city, clean it, and work to help return its residents to their homes.

It is the central government's responsibility, first, and the local government, second, to support all those who contribute or work with dedication for the revival of the city. Therefore, all assistance should be provided to facilitate these efforts, not only in the city's reconstruction but in building bridges of communication.

As Pope Francis said, his advice is to build souls before the buildings, building bridges between different religions and sects so that everyone can reach the meeting point. Then the road will be clear for moving forward to accelerate progress on all levels.

Tech4Peace is a non-profit organization in Canada and Iraq on a humanitarian mission to reduce the spread of violence and terrorism by reporting websites & social media pages that spread false news/propaganda promoting violence/terrorism. Its vision is to achieve peace and stability by being an end to the circulation of lies in mainstream and social media across the Middle East, primarily in Iraq. www.t4p.co

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