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Pope Francis' Historic Visit to Iraq: Its Significance for the Christian Minority, Religious Diversity and Reconstruction

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Abstract:

Iraq has been associated with religious fanaticism, terror, war, instability and a divided society in recent years. Religious minority groups have been socially, politically and economically marginalized, leaving many with no other choice than to emigrate. Against this



Pope Francis giving his first speech in Iraq, Baghdad Palace, 5 March 2021

background, the Pope's recent visit to the country is of fundamental importance. Many Iraqi political and religious figures highly welcomed the Pontiff's visit as a sign of peace and hope. The visit is of particular significance for Christians and other religious minorities disproportionately affected by the Daesh (the self-proclaimed "Islamic State") invasion. By providing remedy and moral support for the war-affected religious groups, the Pope's visit can contribute to post-conflict reconstruction and reconciliation. However, for many in Iraq – and especially the Christian minority – security remains the most crucial issue. The Iraqi government, religious communities and international humanitarian and development actors should use the momentum generated by the visit to spur their efforts in security, reconstruction, development and interreligious dialogue in the country.

Pope Francis' Historic Visit to Iraq: Its Significance for the Christian Minority, Religious Diversity and Reconstruction

Introduction

In recent history, Iraq has been affected by religious fanaticism, terror, war, instability and a divided society. Internationally, negative headlines dominate the perspective on the country. This image has been fuelled by a series of events, especially by the war. Against this background, the significance of Pope Francis' recent visit to Iraq can hardly be overemphasized. The visit can contribute to changing the view on Iraq and highlight and foster political and religious stakeholders' efforts at reconstruction and reform.

Pope Francis is the first Pontiff to visit Iraq. It is his first international journey since the start of the Covid-19 pandemic. He had visited the Middle East as recently as February 2019, participating in an interfaith conference on "human fraternity" that led to a widely recognized high-profile document co-signed by Dr Ahmed el-Tayeb, Sheikh of Al-Azhar University Cairo.¹ The agenda of his four-day travels in Iraq included visits to Baghdad, Ur (Nasiriya), Najaf, Erbil, Mosul and Qaraqosh, and meetings with political authorities and religious leaders, most notably Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani. According to the Vatican Secretary of State Cardinal Parolin, the Apostolic visit to Iraq had a threefold aim, namely to show the closeness to the Catholic church, boost the reconstruction efforts, and consolidate interreligious dialogue.²

During his first speech in the country, which took place in Baghdad Palace, the Pope's key messages highlighted the challenges faced by Iraq requiring cooperation in order to combat inequalities. He articulated that the international community should continue its joint work with the Iraqi government. Especially referring to the role of religion, he emphasized that the name of God should not be used for oppression and injustice. Moreover, he called for peaceful conflict resolution and encouraged the Iraqi government to pursue the planned reforms. On that note, international NGOs and Iraqi civil society members expressed in a joint open letter to the See of Rome that "His Holiness Pope Francis' visit to Iraq is an ideal opportunity to promote cooperation and unity."³ In this letter, they recommend that governments and other stakeholders take the proposed steps to provide a remedy for all the groups affected by Daesh (the self-proclaimed "Islamic State") occupation and promote religious freedom and social cohesion.

The Pope's visit is highly welcomed by the religious and political authorities in the region and in Iraq specifically. Ahmed al-Tayeb, the Sheikh of Al-Azhar in Egypt, expressed in a tweet "My brother @Pontifex's historic and courageous visit to Iraq sends a message for peace, solidarity and support to all Iraqi people. I pray to Almighty Allah to grant him success and that this trip achieves the desired outcome to continue the path of human fraternity."⁴ Muqtada al-Sadr, one of the most prominent Shia clerics in the region, posted on Twitter: "[...] I have heard there are opponents to the visit of (The Pope) to our beloved Iraq. I say: the openness to religions is desirable, and his (The Pope) visit to Iraq is welcomed, and our hearts, before our doors, are open to him. [...]"⁵ In a similar vein, Iraq's President,

¹ [Document on "Human Fraternity for World Peace and Living Together" Signed by His Holiness Pope Francis and the Grand Imam of Al-Azhar Ahamad al-Tayyib \(Abu Dhabi, 4 February 2019\).](#)

² <https://www.vaticannews.va/en/vatican-city/news/2021-03/pope-francis-iraq-apostolic-visit-church.html>

³ <https://www.paxforpeace.nl/publications/all-publications/ngo-open-letter-to-the-holy-see>.

⁴ <https://twitter.com/alimamaltayeb/status/136777544146866176>.

⁵ https://twitter.com/Mu_AlSadr/status/1360667887606894592/photo/1.

Barham Salih, tweeted: “[...] The journey of Pope Francis to Mesopotamia- cradle of civilization, birthplace of Abraham, father of the faithful- will be a message of peace to Iraqis of all religions & serve to affirm our common values of justice & dignity.”⁶ Martin Huth, ambassador of the European Union to Iraq, described the Pope’s visit as “a message of peace and hope for Iraq and the entire region.”⁷ Moreover, in a meeting with Pope Francis, Ali Al-Sistani, one of the two highest Shia religious authorities in the world, stressed the importance of concrete efforts to consolidate the values of harmony, peaceful coexistence and human solidarity in all societies.⁸ On that occasion, Mustafa Al-Kadhimi, Prime Minister of Iraq, announced “[...] we declare March 6 a National Day of Tolerance and coexistence in Iraq.”⁹

The quotes above illustrate the importance of the Pope’s visit. It increases the legitimacy for the Iraqi government in affirming to its citizens and the world that Iraq is a stable and secure nation, which is recovering from the conflicts of the past while demonstrating its commitment to the preservation of the country’s ethno-religious diversity. Moreover, the Pope’s visit is of fundamental significance for the Christians in Iraq, as they have been disproportionately affected by the protracted conflicts in the country.

Before the Pope’s visit, the Iraqi government improved the infrastructure and appearance of the visited areas – much to the joy of the local population in the respective areas, as is apparent on social media.¹⁰ The improvement of infrastructure shows that Iraq’s government does have the capacity to deliver services and rebuild infrastructure – the Pope’s visit shows that reconstruction is possible. This action also indicates the government’s desire to gain the Pope’s respect, and therefore a better international image for Iraq.

The Christians of Iraq

Christians have a long history in Iraq. Iraqi Christians are the oldest Christian communities in the Orient. The majority of Iraqi Christians are Chaldean, Assyrian and Syriac and speak different dialects of Aramaic. In the course of history, Christians and other minority groups in Iraq have been socially, politically and economically marginalized, which left many with no other choice than to emigrate. They do not see chances for “a secure, peaceful and dignified existence within Iraq,” as a recent report highlights.¹¹ For many minority communities, this means giving up the land or territories that are inextricably linked to their culture, faith, heritage and identity. Since 2003, 50% of Iraqi Christians have left the country. Today it is estimated that only 250,000 to 300,000 Christians reside in Iraq,¹² mostly

⁶ <https://twitter.com/BarhamSalih/status/1335912196228993024>.

⁷ <https://ina.iq/eng/10794-eu-ambassador-the-popes-visit-is-a-message-of-peace-to-iraq-and-the-region.html>

⁸ <https://www.sistani.org/arabic/statement/26506/>. Marc-Stephan Giese, a Middle East-based Jesuit participating in the visit, points out the relevance of this particular encounter, noting that dialogue with the Shia community lags behind relations with the Sunni world. Thus a meeting with Sistani, a Shia cleric with global reach, who is however known for taking very few meetings, speaks a lot to the Pope’s reach and influence.

⁹ <https://twitter.com/MAKadhimi/status/1368194212265615361?s=20>.

¹⁰ This video shows the well-known Iraqi cheerleader Mahdi al-Iraqi rejoicing because of the newly paved streets (<https://www.facebook.com/100013629992442/posts/1099441277186862/?d=n>).

¹¹ [Institute for International Law and Human Rights, Minority Rights Group International, No Peace Without Justice and Unrepresented Nations and Peoples Organisation. 2017. *Crossroads: The Future of Iraq’s Minorities after ISIS*, p. 32.](#)

¹² [Saad Salloum, Barriers to return for ethno-religious minorities in Iraq. Identity Politics and Political Patronage Among Yazidi and Christian Communities from Ninewa Governorate. IOM Iraq \(2020\).](#)

living in Mosul, the Ninewa Plains, Baghdad, Kirkuk, Basra and the Kurdistan Region. Christians perceive their religious community to be close to extinction.

Against this background, the Pope’s visit is highly significant to the Christian minority, Liza Hido, President of Baghdad Women Association and Christian activist explains. The Pope’s visit will “comfort Christians who, amid wars and conflicts, have been forced to flee from Iraq” and, according to Ms Hido, will hence encourage the Christians to stay in the land of the ancestors and prophets. Tharaa, a Malteser International employee in Iraq, explained what the Pope’s visit means to her as a Christian: “The Pontifical visit carries a spiritual message, to not forget that God is always with us, where after the hard times of displacement we were able to return back to our homes. And the peace work always wins against the devil [sic] actions. We are grateful for his Holiness to [sic] the prayers and visit to the Iraqi people.”¹³ Even beyond the Christian sphere, the Pope’s visit bears great potential for increasing religious freedom in the country. Saad Salloum, an activist and independent expert working extensively on ethno-religious diversity, stated that “this visit will provide a collective psychological restoration of all the Iraqi people who have been through war and conflict. It will also create an awareness and an understanding of the religious groups’ diversity.”

The Potential Influence of the Pope’s Visit

Since the retaking of the Daesh-occupied areas, efforts have been made to reconstruct the affected areas, rebuild houses and infrastructure, and reconcile the affected people. The Pope’s visit has the potential to contribute to the recovery from the conflict and the political instability by providing moral support for the war-affected religious groups. The Pope’s re-affirmation of the unity of the monotheistic religions will likely create awareness, acceptance and respect amongst various religious groups and promote interreligious dialogue. President Barham Salih announced the “establishment of a permanent conference or seminar for dialogue, headed by representatives from the Vatican, Najaf, Al Azhar, Al Zeituna and other big religious centers that study joint and different histories in light of the holy code and the cuneiformist heritage.”¹⁴ This is a vivid example of how a Papal visit can catalyse the establishment of new structures for dialogue on the ground. President Salih mentioned this endeavour in one breath with his support for the “Abrahamic Family House” in the United Arab Emirates, a project which in turn emerged from Pope Francis’ visit to Abu Dhabi in 2019. This Papal journey also saw the signing of the “Document on Human Fraternity for World Peace and Living Together.”¹⁵

This visit might also contribute to reducing migration trends, especially among the Christian communities. Further, in consequence of the Pope’s pilgrimage in Ur, religious practices and tourism beyond the Islamic tradition may become allowed in Iraq. This, of course, requires reconstruction and security measures to be put in place by the Iraqi government.

During his visit, the Pope was received by the highest-ranking religious as well as political leaders, putting him in a unique position of leading and shaping the discourse on interreligious relations and social issues in a politically relevant yet non-partisan way that emphasizes their moral, ethical and value aspects. Francis’ papacy has in the past emphasized issues of violent religious extremism and

¹³ https://www.linkedin.com/posts/malteser-international_what-does-the-popes-visit-mean-for-christians-activity-6773606154351206400-AXWF/.

¹⁴ <https://www.thenationalnews.com/mena/iraq/pope-in-iraq-barham-salih-s-welcome-speech-in-full-1.1178379>.

¹⁵ [Abrahamic Family House, For Human Fraternity](#).

interfaith dialogue¹⁶, displacement¹⁷ and ecological and economic sustainability.¹⁸ The potential for development cooperation lies in the fact that he can simultaneously interface with religious and secular leaders, as well as with religious and secular communities, to advocate for these topics. This is particularly evident during his journeys as they occasion joint statements, symbols like a new annual awareness day, as well as the foundation of new organizations that operationalize the spirit of the journey in its wake.

Policy Implications

All specific initiatives as well as the general momentum catalysed by the papal visit will require commitment and collaboration on the part of international actors, the governments of Iraq and Kurdistan, religious leaders, local NGOs and individuals. Iraq’s government should spur efforts to continue much-needed reconstruction efforts, infrastructure improvements, reconciliation and stability, as well as fostering interreligious dialogue. The international community and international development agencies should support the government’s efforts in this regard. The visit is timely to spur cooperative action by religious communities and support their efforts at reconciliation. Supporting religious communities’ engagement with international development funds bears the potential of generating a substantial impact on interreligious relations, reconstruction and development in the country. The Pontiff’s historic visit points at a unique window of opportunity for multi-stakeholder partnerships by religious communities, political leaders, civil society and international development for reconstruction, development and social cohesion in Iraq. A prerequisite for a dialogue on equal footing is to acknowledge that the emergence of Daesh was inter alia a reaction to the war waged on Iraq by the United States and their allies in 2003, under the false assumption of the presence of weapons of mass destruction in the country. That war has been coined by many people in the region as a war of “the West” against “Islam”. The Pope did not address the Iraq War explicitly. However, highlighting this issue is crucial in order to engage in an open dialogue successfully and to spread the message of peace.

Finally, it is worth looking out for Catholic background organizations that reflect on an organizational level the Pope’s ability to forge and foster broad interfaith coalitions for social action, relief and development. They can be potent platforms for working efficiently in the wider Middle East region. Catholic Relief Services, for example, led a three-year project to specifically build the capacity of faith-based organizations for emergency relief in Jordan and Lebanon.¹⁹ Especially in Beirut, this led to a potent network of several local organizations from different faith backgrounds that cooperated in their response to the coronavirus pandemic and the Beirut port explosion in 2020, while tapping into the resources of all respective partners and, as a cooperative network, representing the diversity of the people it served.

¹⁶ [Francis, Apostolic Journey to Egypt: To the Participants in the International Peace Conference \(Al-Azhar Conference Centre, Cairo - 28 April 2017\).](#)

¹⁷ [Francis, The Holy Father’s Words during the Flight from Rome to Lesbos \(16 April 2016\).](#)

¹⁸ [Francis, Laudato Si \(24 May 2015\).](#)

¹⁹ [Preparing to Excel in Emergency Response \(PEER\), Drupal, 22 February 2018.](#)

Zusammenfassung auf Deutsch

Papst Franziskus' historischer Besuch im Irak und seine Bedeutung für die christliche Minderheit, religiöse Diversität und Wiederaufbau

*Der Irak wurde in den letzten Jahren mit religiösem Fanatismus, Terror, Krieg, Instabilität und einer gespaltenen Gesellschaft assoziiert. Religiöse Minderheiten wurden gesellschaftlich, politisch und wirtschaftlich ausgegrenzt, sodass vielen keine andere Wahl blieb, als auszuwandern. Vor diesem Hintergrund ist der jüngste Irak-Besuch des Papstes von grundlegender Bedeutung. Viele irakische politische und religiöse Persönlichkeiten begrüßten den Besuch des Pontifex als ein Zeichen des Friedens und der Hoffnung. Der Besuch ist von besonderer Bedeutung für Christ*innen und andere religiöse Minderheiten, die von der Gewalt-herrschaft des selbsternannten ‚Islamischen Staates‘ besonders stark betroffen waren. Der Besuch des Papstes könnte zum Wiederaufbau und zur Versöhnung nach dem Konflikt beitragen, indem er den vom Krieg betroffenen religiösen Gruppen moralische Unterstützung bietet. Für viele Menschen im Irak – und besonders für die christliche Minderheit – bleibt jedoch die Sicherheit das wichtigste Thema. Die irakische Regierung, die Religionsgemeinschaften sowie die internationalen humanitären und entwicklungspolitischen Akteure sollten den durch den Besuch erzeugten Impuls nutzen, um ihre Bemühungen um Sicherheit, Wiederaufbau, Entwicklung und interreligiösen Dialog im Land voranzubringen.*

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