

The Pope Meets the Ayatollah

by [Mehdi Khalaji \(/experts/mehdi-khalaji\)](#)

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ABOUT THE AUTHORS



[Mehdi Khalaji \(/experts/mehdi-khalaji\)](#)

Mehdi Khalaji, a Qom-trained Shiite theologian, is the Libitzky Family Fellow at The Washington Institute.



Brief Analysis

The Vatican's outreach to Iraq is laudable in its goal of decreasing religious violence, but Western officials should be realistic about what engagement with Shia religious leaders can accomplish in the near term.

As part of his March 5-8 trip to Iraq, Pope Francis will visit the holy city of Najaf to meet with Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani, one of the world's most prominent Shia Muslim authorities. According to Cardinal Leonardo Sandri, the trip's purpose is "to console and encourage" all those who have struggled under Iraq's waves of invasion, civil war, sectarian strife, terrorism, and instability—not only the Muslim majority, but also Catholics and other religious minorities. Sandri noted that Iraq's Christian community has been attacked and persecuted to such a degree that its population decreased from 1.5 million in 2003 to less than 300,000 today.

Ayatollah Sistani is a potentially promising candidate for outreach on this and other interfaith issues. He is internationally recognized for his largely constructive role in managing Iraq's crises since the ouster of Saddam Hussein, and widely respected for refusing to seize any executive, managerial, or political post throughout this period—in sharp contrast to the all-encompassing power grabs that Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei and his predecessor carried out in Iran. For the most part, Sistani's public statements have supported reconciliation between Shia and Sunnis, called for intertribal and ethnic peace, and facilitated the drafting and ratification of a new constitution by referendum, all in the midst of major political turmoil.

Popes in the Muslim World

This is not the first time that Pope Francis has visited a Muslim-majority country. He has paid significant attention to interfaith relations and dialogue since the beginning of his tenure, visiting Turkey in 2014, Azerbaijan in 2016, Egypt in 2017, and Morocco and the United Arab Emirates in 2019, among other countries.

Yet this is his first trip to Iraq, home to four major Shia holy cities and the historically important Najaf seminary. This will also be the first meeting of any type between a pope and a grand ayatollah.

According to Cardinal Louis Raphael Sako, the Iraqi-born priest who heads the Chaldean Catholic Church and has been instrumental in organizing the trip over the past two years, the pope and Sistani will release a joint declaration against “all those who attack life.” Yet he could not confirm “if the two would sign a document on human fraternity, as is the cardinal’s wish.” Cardinal Sandri mentioned one potential touchstone: the February 2019 “Document on Human Fraternity” that Pope Francis signed in Abu Dhabi with Sheikh Ahmed al-Tayeb, the grand imam of al-Azhar and a widely respected figure in Sunni Islam. According to a Vatican correspondent, Sandri also described the visit “as being ‘in continuity’ with the desire of Pope John Paul II, who wanted to visit Ur—the homeland of Abraham, considered the father of faith in one God in Judaism, Christianity and Islam—during the Great Jubilee Year 2000 but was unable to.”

Shia Leaders and Interfaith Interactions

Unlike the pope, who is officially regarded as the chief pontiff for Catholic communities worldwide, none of the ayatollahs can claim exclusive leadership over Shia Muslims. This pluralistic authority and the confluence of spiritual and political matters in post-revolutionary Iran have limited the ayatollahs’ ability to exert unified religious diplomacy independent of national boundaries. As a result, relations between the Vatican and Shia leaders are controlled by states, not seminaries, and the Iranian regime has systematically blocked genuine efforts to bridge its faith with other religions.

Philosophical and theological factors also pose substantial obstacles to broader Islamic dialogue and rapprochement with Christianity and other religions. These factors make the signing of a fraternity declaration in Najaf more unlikely than not.

First of all, mainstream Islamic theological branches regard modern Christianity as an inauthentic version of the original religion, one that has been altered by church fathers. For instance, they view Jesus as the divine prophet, not as the incarnation of God and his son. In short, for official Islam, today’s Christianity is nothing short of heresy. Such attitudes help explain why Christians cannot enter mosques or visit Mecca, and why numerous Shia fatwas and the laws of the Islamic Republic assert that conversion from Islam to Christianity (or any religion) should be punished by death.

Second, unlike in the West, where interfaith relations and religious tolerance have been a matter of philosophical and theological contemplation since at least the eighteenth century, such debates are almost nonexistent in Shia seminaries. In practice, this lack of intellectual foundations for interfaith dialogue has curbed the practical appetite for significant initiatives in that direction. In the Christian world, these intellectual grounds have been institutionalized in religious offices and bureaus, including inside the Vatican. But in the Shia world, no *marja* (grand ayatollah) has created a specific office bureau to address this issue or stationed a representative in the Vatican.

Third, the ayatollahs do not share the papal habit of publicly calling out the persecution of other faiths. In 2017, for instance, Pope Francis expressed sympathy with the Muslim-majority Rohingya people undergoing a military crackdown in Myanmar, declaring, “The presence of God today is also called Rohingya.” Yet Shia authorities have rarely reacted to violence against non-Muslims, whether in the Middle East or elsewhere in the world.

The record of ecumenism between Shia and Sunnis has hardly been fruitful either. Since World War II, Muslims have engaged in war and violence against each other much more often than non-Muslims have. Sunnis in Iran and Shia in Saudi Arabia are still treated as second-class citizens. Again, this friction stems from a combination of political tensions, theological antagonism, and the lack of an intellectual basis for true intra-Muslim ecumenism.

Who's Afraid of the Meeting?

Pope Francis is not welcome in the Islamic Republic of Iran, where Christians, Jews, and other faiths face systematic legal discrimination and social segregation. Openly proselytizing any religion besides Shia Islam is forbidden by law—converts to Christianity are often imprisoned and sentenced to death, and several priests have been brutally assassinated by intelligence operatives over the past forty years. The regime has established official relations with the Vatican, but they can hardly be characterized as warm.

As for the pope's visit to Najaf, Iranian leaders recognize its historical significance—and also the threat it poses to their authority. The meeting will constitute exceptional recognition of Sistani as perhaps the world's paramount Shia authority, and of Najaf as the center of the Shia clerical establishment. Given the [longstanding competition \(https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/shia-leadership-after-sistani-sudden-succession-essay-series\)](https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/shia-leadership-after-sistani-sudden-succession-essay-series) between Sistani and Khamenei (and Najaf and Qom), Iranian leaders are likely uncomfortable about the trip. For their part, the clerics who head Sistani's office in Qom have been careful to avoid highlighting the meeting in a way that provokes the regime. In fact, the pope's visit has generated little debate or attention in Persian-language state media, semi-independent media, or even social media.

Conclusion

Western powers should make a habit of encouraging Muslim leaders to engage in interfaith dialogues and other interactions. Yet one of the main problems with Shia grand ayatollahs is that they tend to live in isolation from society. They rarely go anywhere apart from their homes, offices, and mosques, let alone make trips to other countries or even other cities. They do not give interviews to media and generally keep out of public sight. This partly explains their usual silence in the face of human tragedies elsewhere in the world and violence at home.

Thus, while interfaith initiatives may eventually help burrow under these Shia walls, the West cannot afford to harbor delusional expectations about the practical outcomes of papal visits and similar events in the short term. Mainstream Muslim leaders do not take enough responsibility for what is happening in their own communities, so they can hardly be expected to hold great value for interfaith initiatives and their requisite political risk. For now, then, Western governments seeking durable and productive engagement with the Muslim world should focus more attention and investment on secular and liberal intellectuals, academics, and influential personalities in the region.

Mehdi Khalaji is the Libitzky Family Fellow at The Washington Institute. ❖

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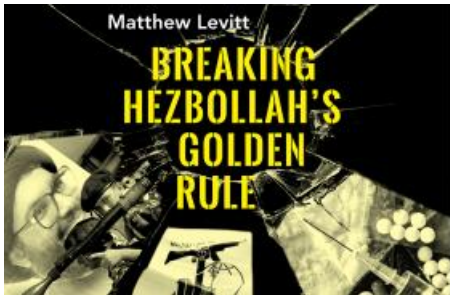


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