

The Pope's Visit to Najaf: Reflecting on Iraq's Legacy of Religious Divisions

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Brief Analysis

Given our perpetual crises, we Iraqis rarely look back. But unless Iraqis collectively understand the past and decide how to avoid repeating its mistakes, we are bound to pay these crimes forward as we have in the past.

Pope Francis's visit to Iraq this week—arriving with a message of peace and human fraternity—is a good story about Iraq, and God knows Iraq needs one.

By any measure, the visit is historic—it is the first ever visit of a Pope to Iraq. Equally groundbreaking is the Pope's visit to Najaf, Shia Islam's Vatican, and his meeting there with Grand Ayatollah Ali Sistani. Thanks to his visit, many outside Iraq will learn that Iraq is home to Ur, the birthplace of Abraham. More importantly, the Pope will console Iraq's wounded Christian community. Likewise, the Iraqi welcome of the Pope's visit is warm and unified.

But I hope the Pope's visit and his Najaf summit can be more than a good story. Although necessary, consolation and forgiveness alone will fall short of ending Iraq's cycle of violence against minorities often perpetuated in the name of Islam. The Pope's visit can serve as a wake up call to Iraq to examine the scars left by its cycle of religious violence, and take a moment to truly reflect on how to prevent this cycle from continuing.

We Iraqis have had our fair share of suffering, be it organized state violence by Saddam Hussein's genocidal regime against the Kurds, the chaos of sectarian civil war in the years after his ouster, or ISIS's brutal terrorism. As sudden political competition coincided with the collapse of the Iraqi state, religious and sectarian identity drove power and politics. More than ever during that period, one's religious identity could decide life or death. Between 2005 and 2007, being Shia was enough crime to be killed over by Al-Qaeda in Iraq. In turn, Shia militias, many of whom still roam unchecked, killed able-bodied Sunni men and bombed their towns and neighborhoods. Baghdad was all but forced into segregated sectarian zones.

Among ISIS's early victims were the Christian and Yezidi communities. Along with many Muslim mosques and shrines, ISIS destroyed churches and Yezidi temples. Iraq's Christian community shrunk from 1.5 million to either an estimated quarter or a sixth of a million. The Yezidi community likewise suffered from displacement and enslavement. Akin to the Moghul invaders of Mesopotamia hundreds of years earlier, ISIS left behind only destruction and suffering.

These are all serious and enduring wounds within Iraq's pluralistic society, but the government has handled this history by paying the victims reparations and attempting to move on. In this environment, the subsequent suffering of Christians, Yezidis, and other minority communities was horrific but unsurprising.

Today, the ISIS caliphate is no more, and most Iraqis consider explicitly sectarian speech a taboo. But absent serious reckoning, greater education, and stronger laws that promote tolerance and ban hate speech, the cycle of religious violence in Iraq is unlikely to stop.

This is not to say there hasn't been some progress. Iraqi and Kurdish governments often describe the actions of Saddam and ISIS as crimes against humanity and pronounce their support and sympathy for their victims. The Iraqi federal and Kurdish regional parliaments have passed significant legislation recognizing these victims—most recently the Yezidi Female Survivors law passed this week in Baghdad, which recognizes the suffering of Yezidi and other minority women at the hands of ISIS as genocide. Along with official recognition of their suffering, the law—like others addressing the suffering of Saddam's or terrorism's victims—offers compensation.

However, this law is also the exception rather than the norm. Much of the response to sectarian violence falls short of legislation in favor of weaker executive orders or parliamentary decisions. Still missing, and where Iraq's body politics and elites have fallen short, are efforts to address the root causes of religious violence and how to implement efforts to end its cycle.

Given our perpetual crises, we Iraqis rarely look back. But unless Iraqis collectively understand the past and decide how to avoid repeating its mistakes, we are bound to pay these crimes forward as we have in the past. We need to do more if we want the Yezidi genocide and Christian expulsion to be the last instance of religious violence and intolerance in Iraq. The country needs a serious dialogue between political, religious, and intellectual leaders about the recurrent violent episodes carried out in the name of religion. Iraq also needs stronger laws that protect minority rights. Moreover, the values of diversity and tolerance need to be integral to Friday sermons and classrooms discussions.

Perhaps the original sin for religious intolerance and violence in modern Iraq can be traced back to the dispossession and expulsion of the country's Jews. The impulse after that dark episode was likewise to forget and move on rather than soul-search and learn how not to repeat it. Even so, my grandmother spoke of her Jewish neighbors; her vocabulary and maxims were littered with Jewish family names, anecdotes, and, yes, stereotypes.

I grew up in an Iraq with Jewish neighborhoods emptied of their community, but I did have many Christian friends and classmates. I had a sad reckoning that had ISIS's legacy succeeded in expelling all Christians out of Iraq, my kids could have grown up in an Iraq with no Christian, Yezidi, or Shabak classmates the way I grew up without Jewish ones. I have no statistics to prove it, but I am sure my grandparents' generation lived a richer and more tolerant life than mine. That this cycle has been left to repeat itself proposes a dark prospect for the future, if I am right.

Then, there is the question of faith itself in Iraq. No one has done more damage to my faith, Islam, than those who kill and steal in its name, be it ISIS or the Islamic Republic of Iran. Some were shocked about [rising atheist numbers](https://www.nbcnews.com/news/world/iraq-s-atheists-go-underground-sunni-shiite-hard-liners-dominate-n983076) (<https://www.nbcnews.com/news/world/iraq-s-atheists-go-underground-sunni-shiite-hard-liners-dominate-n983076>) in Iraq. I, for one, am shocked that mosques are still full of worshippers—it is nothing short of a miracle given the political and military representations of Islam. Many militia leaders and political big men don the turban

but derive little tolerance or compassion from the faith, and Iraq has a record number of Islamic parties running one of the most corrupt and dysfunctional governments in the world. These parties have little to offer by way of answers from their faith to the Iraqi youth that demands peace, prosperity, and rule of law.

Hijacked religion could be a common concern for the Pope and the Grand Ayatollah. They are the nominal protectors of their respective faiths. Although GA Sistani stands in stark contrast to the Iranian model where the imam is also the head of state, his followers in politics and armed groups have nevertheless done a measure on the reputation of Shia Islam. By meeting with the Pope, GA Sistani is also setting a positive standard for interfaith tolerance for his successor. Moreover, the two men derive their power and legitimacy from their followers rather than a state. Unlike Iran or indeed most Sunni countries, GA Sistani is not a state employee nor does he answer to one. Many await his stronger denunciation of the instability that militias cause abusing his name. Nevertheless, the minaret and the bell summit in Najaf carries significant religious interfaith weight in Iraq and beyond, and an important next step to the Pope's visit to UAE.

Between Iran and ISIS, Islam's name and image could use some laundering. Muslims leaders need to categorically condemn violence done in God's name. Putting God's name on a banner does not grant any militia or party impunity. We recall the scene from Mosul post ISIS where a Muslims in uniform solemnly returned a cross to a church. In the meantime, like its Christian community, the Iraqi Muslim community's welcome of the Pope and the Najaf meeting is one major leap in the right direction. ❖

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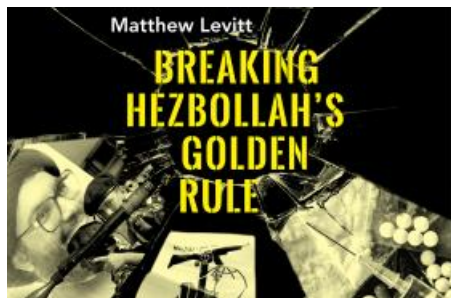
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