

The Pope, the Ayatollah, and the future of the Middle East

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The historic meeting between Pope Francis and the Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani is a glimpse of the future of the Middle East — one that puts spirituality and social justice above politics and sectarianism. (Vatican Pool/Vatican Media / Vatican Pool via Getty Images)

This week's visit by 84-year-old Pope Francis to Iraq is significant for many reasons. It is a celebration of the defeat of Islamic State/*Daesh*. It is a recognition of the Iraqi people's spirit. It is a reminder of the 1,400-year history of Muslim-Christian coexistence. But perhaps most notable is that senior Shi'a scholar, Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani, has hosted the Pope in the city of Najaf. I have personally accompanied US and UK delegations to visit the Ayatollah since 2015. I know that, although they are habitually camera shy, Iraq's Shi'a clerics have strengthened civil society, bolstered multiculturalism, and helped eradicate *Daesh*.

The world owes them more recognition — and to understand that their tradition, worldview, and policies are not at odds with Western values, and that “Ayatollah” is not always synonymous with the caricatures present in many Western minds.

Iraq is a Shi'a-majority country. Any visit to Iraq is a visit to the heartland of Shi'a Islam. By visiting the “Shi'a capital” of Najaf, the resting place of Imam Ali, Pope Francis is reaching out to an often invisible but hugely significant school of thought in the Muslim world. This should also be the beginning of more international celebration of the positive role religious leaders like Ayatollah Sistani play in the region.

Such overdue recognition is in the interests of Shi'a Muslims — and all Muslims who want the world to understand their faith as one of moderation and peace. It is also in the interests of Christian minorities in Iraq, since it is Shi'a leaders who have been pivotal in transitioning the country to a “civil state” in post-Saddam society — an idea that the Ayatollah has long promoted.

Under Baathist rule, Christian schools were nationalised, and a law was passed dictating that the religion's history could be taught in state schools only if at least a quarter of the pupils were Christian. This systemic sidelining of religious minorities was something that both Shi'a and Christian Iraqis suffered — and the solidarity it bred has outlasted the dictator. This solidarity was crucial in the fight against *Daesh*, whose recruits forced thousands of Christians to flee their homes.

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Although there is no papacy in Islam, Grand Ayatollah al-Sistani is maybe the closest thing Muslims have to a pontiff. There are over 300 million Shi'a Muslims worldwide, most of which follow the Grand Ayatollah, despite him holding no political office and dedicating himself to a simple life of learning and teaching. Although Sistani has been ranked among the world's most influential Muslims and was nominated — by a group of exiled Iraqi Christians — for the Nobel Peace Prize in 2014, he keeps a remarkably low profile internationally. Often, so does the community he represents.

This representation has been a lifeline for peace and stability in the region. On 13 June 2014, the Ayatollah delivered the famous *wajib al-kifai fatwa*, a religious ruling on “collective obligation”. The Iraqi army had just collapsed after being defeated by Daesh in Mosul. The extremists were poised to march on Baghdad, and to destabilise the region and the world for a generation. It was this *fatwa* that led to the creation of thousands of volunteers who became known as the Popular Mobilisation Forces, which ultimately provided the boots-on-the-ground to retake territory from *Daesh*.

Although the history books may give more space to Coalition forces or the Kurdish peshmerga, the true turning point of the war against *Daesh* was when one man in Najaf wrote that “the responsibility for confronting and fighting [the terrorists] is the responsibility of all, not of one sect or one party alone.”

This was not an aberration; Iraq's Shia Muslims, led by Sistani, have long been committed to coexistence and social justice, not supremacism and extremism. The roots of Shi'a apolitical work towards civil rights — and especially minority rights — run deep through Islam's history. Whereas some groups within Islam may have campaigned with military might and worldly power that propelled Muslim empires to imperial greatness, Shi'a history is characterised by a quiet, principled movement aimed at protecting human rights against the excesses of power.

The Shi'a see themselves as guardians of the Prophet Muhammad's message — one embedded in moderation, coexistence, and peace. This is why Shi'a Islam, including Sistani and his millions of followers around the world, is so important to the future of coexistence in the Middle East, and across the world. Just as Sistani's edict six years ago was a turning point in the fight against Daesh, his act of hosting of Pope Francis could be a new page in Christian-Muslim relations. I hope the eyes of the world can see that.

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