

## President Rouhani to visit New York cathedral



(©Afp) Rouhani at the UN

*Iran's head of government is expected tomorrow at St. John the Divine, the cathedral of the Episcopal diocese of New York, where he will meet representatives of religious communities*

**GIORGIO BERNARDELLI, VATICAN INSIDER, 25 SEPTEMBER 2015**

Iran's President Hassan Rouhani – who is currently in New York for the UN General Assembly – is to visit a Christian cathedral in the United States tomorrow. Here's he will meet representatives of the Big Apple's religious communities. This is one of many events that Rouhani will be attending in New York on this unique occasion. Indeed, this is the only visit Teheran's political leadership will be paying to the US in order to attend the UN meeting.

Ever since Mahmoud Ahmadinejad's presidency, the presidential visit to New York has been the main platform from which Iran has spoken to the world. It was on this occasion 12 months ago that the historic telephone conversation between Rouhani and Barack Obama made headlines. This was the first time the presidents of Iran and the US had had any direct contact since the Iran hostage crisis of 1979. This year, in addition to all the political meetings Rouhani will be attending at the UN, an interreligious gathering has also been crammed into the Iranian president's agenda. On Friday morning, Rouhani will be visiting St. John the Divine, the cathedral of the Episcopal diocese of New York, for a meeting with representatives of various religious communities. It will be a closed-door meeting and will not even be advertised on the historic cathedral's website. The only public reference to the event, is the announcement that the cathedral will only be open for visits after midday.

Given today's climate – which is heavily marked by religious sectarianism in the Middle East and with regional balances shifting dramatically, influenced by the situation in Syria – the fact that the President of the Shia Republic of the Ayatollahs is visiting a Christian cathedral, is significant. From a diplomatic point of view, it also says a great deal about how crucial interreligious dialogue is for a country that aspires to enter the international relations arena again. Even Saudi Arabia – whose Sunni government is a major counterbalance to Iran's Shias – has founded a Vienna-based centre for interreligious dialogue. Ayatollahs on their part have maintained all the ties that the University of Qom – a doctrinal reference point for Shiites – has had for a long time with many Christian bodies, including the Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue. Not to mention the diplomatic relations the Islamic Republic of Iran also has with the Holy See.

But the question for both Riyadh and Teheran is: what impact does this have on religious freedom in each of these countries. Rouhani's takeover of the Iranian presidency does not

seem to have triggered any major changes in this domain. In the latest edition of the International Religious Freedom Report published annually by the US State Department, Iran features among the countries that impose severe restrictions on non-Shia religious groups. Open Doors, an NGO that publishes one of the most important reports on Christian persecution in the world, ranks Iran ninth in the list of countries where the treatment of Christians has rapidly worsened. It is accused of being intolerant towards all Christian communities except the historic Assyrian and Armenian minorities. Iranian law prohibits Christians from praying and preaching in Farsi, with the Evangelical Christian communities suffering the most as a result. The most famous case is that of Fr. Saeed Abedini, an Iranian man with US citizenship, who gave up his Muslim faith to convert to Christianity. He was arrested during a visit to Iran in 2012 and was sentenced to eight years in prison as he was considered “a threat to national security”. He is still behind bars.