Vatican



Pope Francis shakes hands with Mohammed bin Zayed, crown prince of Abu Dhabi and deputy supreme commander of the United Arab Emirates armed forces, during a private audience at the Vatican Sept. 15, 2016. (CNS/L'Osservatore Romano)



by Joshua J. McElwee

View Author Profile

Join the Conversation

Send your thoughts to *Letters to the Editor*. Learn more

Rome — January 29, 2019

Share on BlueskyShare on FacebookShare on TwitterEmail to a friendPrint



The exterior of the then- new St. Paul's Church is seen during its inauguration in Abu Dhabi, United Arab Emirates, June 11, 2015. (CNS /Courtesy of the Apostolic Vicariate of Southern Arabia)

Pope Francis is set to become the first Catholic pope to visit the Arabian peninsula with a trip to the United Arab Emirates next month, but some Middle East experts are wishing he would reconsider the journey.

They point to the Emirates' role taking part in the coalition led by Saudi Arabia in Yemen, which the United Nations has said may have committed war crimes in its efforts to support the government of Abdrabbuh Mansur Hadi against the Houthi armed movement.

Emile Nakhleh, the founding former director of the CIA's Political Islam Strategic Analysis Program, put it quite bluntly: "It's just not good optics for the pope to be visiting the UAE, when they are still involved in all kinds of humanitarian atrocities in

Yemen."

"I don't know how His Holiness can even justify that," said Nakhleh, now the coordinator of National Security Programs at the University of New Mexico.

Others hope however that Francis will use his Feb. 3-5 visit to the Emirati capital of Abu Dhabi to push its political leaders to change their policies in Yemen.

Fr. Paul Lansu, a senior policy advisor for the global Catholic peace group Pax Christi International, said that in being invited to take the trip by Abu Dhabi's Crown Prince Mohammed bin Zayed, the pope faced a dilemma: "Do you talk or not?"

"In both scenarios, it is a risk," said Lansu. "If you don't go, you let them continue doing what they are doing. If you go, you have the occasion, the opportunity, to talk with them."

"I hope the pope ... can convince the leadership of the Emirates to find another policy concerning Yemen, because this is a disaster what they are doing now together with the Saudis," he said.

Francis will have occasion to make such a pitch on the second day of his visit, when he is scheduled to meet privately with the prince, who has assumed most of his country's executive duties after his father, president Khalifa bin Zayed, suffered a stroke in 2014.

Lansu suggested that the pope will need to be "very firm" with the prince, "criticizing the Emirates in playing a role in stimulating the conflict instead of playing the dimension of diplomacy."

Jesuit Fr. Jan Peters, an Islam scholar and former president of the Netherlands Institute for the Middle East, praised Francis for taking the opportunity.

"For the pope, for someone in his position, it's his role ... to speak to people he hopes to convince to take another stand," said Peters, who is also a member of the Board of Trustees of the Islamic University in Rotterdam.

"I think the most important thing is that he is trying to convince the leadership in Abu Dhabi to convince their partners in Yemen ... to take really serious part in the peace talks," he said, referring to recent international efforts to have representatives from both sides of the war in Yemen discuss ending the conflict.



17th-century Gate of Yemen, renamed Liberty Gate in 1962, around the old city of Sana'a, Yemen (Flickr/Dan)

The fighting in Yemen began in 2014, when the Houthi movement took control of the capital of Sana'a.

An August 2018 U.N. report alleged that the Saudi-Emirati coalition had killed thousands of civilians in airstrikes, tortured war prisoners and used child soldiers in actions it said may constitute war crimes under international law.

The report also criticized the coalition's screening of ships coming into the country's principal port city of Hodeidah, which it said has had "a chilling effect on commercial shipping supplies of fuel and food needed to fend off starvation."

The two sides agreed in December to a ceasefire around the port, but both have now accused each other of breaching the agreement, and international organizations

have expressed concern that it will soon fall apart.

Lise Grande, the U.N.'s humanitarian coordinator in Yemen, told reporters gathered in Berlin Jan. 16 for international talks on ending the war that more than 10 million people in the country are at risk of starvation.

Francis' visit to the Emirates will be his 27th trip abroad since his election in 2013 and will come only five days after his Jan. 23-28 visit to Panama for the triennial celebration of World Youth Day.

Unlike each of the pope's previous 26 visits, the schedule for the trip to the Emirates is unusual in that it does not include an opportunity for the pope to publicly address the country's political leaders, but only the private meeting with bin Zayed.

Advertisement

In fact, Francis is scheduled to speak publicly only twice over the three-day visit: during an inter-religious meeting the evening of Feb. 4 and during a Mass for the country's small Catholic community the morning of Feb. 5.

Nakhleh said he thinks the pope needs to use one of those two opportunities to speak openly about the Emirates role in Yemen.

"If he does not raise this issue, the pope would lose much credibility in the Middle East," he said, suggesting that the pope could use his homily during the Mass to do so.

"The sermon has to be about human tragedy," he said. "And if it doesn't touch on that honestly, beyond platitudes, then it will lose its significance."

The Vatican has said the inter-religious meeting Francis will address in Abu Dhabi is centered on "human fraternity," but is yet to provide further details. The pope is scheduled to meet privately beforehand with the Muslim Council of Elders, a UAE-based organization of Islamic scholars founded in 2014.

Peters said he hoped Francis might use the inter-religious encounter to mention a 2006 initiative of Muslim scholars to respond to his predecessor Pope Benedict XVI's address in Regensburg, Germany, that year, which quoted a controversial comment about the Quran by a 14th-century Byzantine emperor.

After Benedict's address provoked street protests in several Islamic countries, 38 Muslim scholars and leaders released a document entitled "A Common Word" in October 2016 to detail the teachings of their faith. A year later, 138 scholars and leaders signed on to an expanded version.

"I hope he will mention the document," said Peters. "It would be great if he would do so, because it's kind of a recognition for these Muslim leaders who have taken the lead to make a new start for dialogue with Christians."

"I think it can be very important also for the relations between Muslims and Christians," he said.

The trip to the Emirates will be Francis' seventh to a Muslim-majority country. His next scheduled visit is in March to Morocco, another Muslim-majority country.

Nakhleh said he wished the pope would be only making the latter trip.

"I wish it was just one trip," he said. "Because if there is any damage or inaction emanating from his visit to the UAE, then the visit to Morocco will be viewed as fence-mending."

[Joshua J. McElwee is NCR Vatican correspondent. His email address is jmcelwee@ncronline.org. Follow him on Twitter: @joshjmac.]

This story appears in the **Francis in United Arab Emirates** feature series. View the full series.