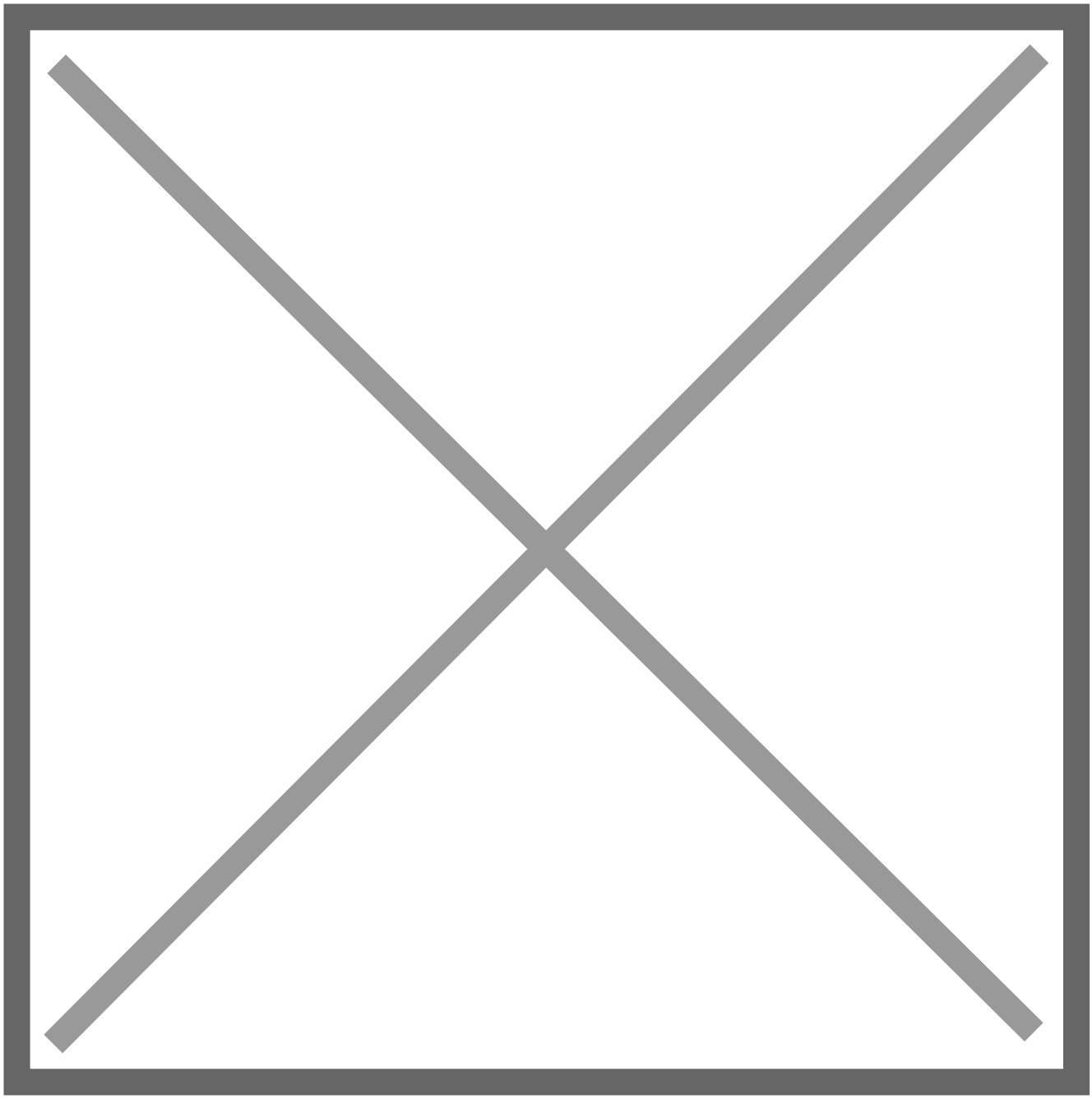
Vatican
News



A poster of Iraq's top Shiite cleric, Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani, is seen on a high-rise building during anti-government protests in Baghdad in this Feb. 9, 2020, file photo. Cardinal Louis Sako, the Baghdad-based patriarch of the Chaldean Catholic Church, briefed journalists Jan. 28 on plans for Pope Francis' trip March 5-8 to Iraq. He said the pope would meet with al-Sistani. (CNS/Reuters/Thaier al-Sudani)



by Catholic News Service

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Rome — January 28, 2021

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Cardinal Louis Sako, the Baghdad-based patriarch of the Chaldean Catholic Church, told reporters Jan. 28 that Pope Francis' March trip to Iraq is still on and that the pope plans to meet personally with Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani, leader of the country's Shiite Muslim majority.

The cardinal spoke to reporters Jan. 28 during an online news conference sponsored by L'Oeuvre d'Orient, the French Catholic charity that supports Eastern Christians, and by the French bishops' conference.

The Vatican has said Pope Francis plans to visit Iraq March 5-8 but has not released details about the pope's schedule. The information provided by Sako is considered provisional until confirmed by the Vatican.

Adel Bakawan, an Iraq expert at the French Institute of International Relations, told reporters that the 90-year-old al-Sistani is an "indisputable reference for all Iraqi Shiites" and that his "fatwas" or judgments are followed to the letter, the French Catholic newspaper La Croix reported.

Dignitaries visiting Iraq always request a meeting with the Shiite leader, but rarely are granted an appointment, Bakawan said.

The pope is scheduled to have a private meeting with al-Sistani March 6 in Najaf, a city 100 miles south of Baghdad that is a pilgrimage site for Shiite Muslims, the cardinal said.

Sako told reporters he hoped the two leaders will agree on a statement "condemning those who attack life," a statement La Croix said referred to terrorist attacks in the country.

But whether or not enough groundwork has been laid for the signing of a joint declaration, Bakawan told reporters the meeting itself "will be invaluable for Muslims, Christians and all Iraqis because it will represent the call to peace, stability and tolerance."

After the meeting with al-Sistani, Sako said, Francis will travel to Ur, the birthplace of Abraham, for an interreligious meeting before returning to Baghdad for a liturgy in the Chaldean cathedral.

As for other stops on the trip, the cardinal said that after arriving March 5, the pope would hold meetings with the prime minister and president and would meet with clergy in Baghdad's Syriac Catholic cathedral.

The day after meeting al-Sistani, he said, the pope will have a busy March 7 visiting Mosul and Qaraqosh in the plain of Ninevah and celebrating Mass in a stadium in Irbil.

The pope will return to Rome March 8, he said.

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