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Analysis



In a file photo, Ayatollah Seyed Mostafa Mohaghegh Damad Ahmadabadi answers reporters' questions in Rome Oct. 14, 2010, before giving a presentation at the Vatican. Amid war in the Middle East, Damada, a prominent figure within Iran's Shia clerical establishment, wrote a public letter to Leo calling for peace and respect for international law. (CNS/Paul Haring)



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As war spreads across the Middle East following the conflict that erupted Feb. 28 between the United States, Israel and Iran, a senior Iranian cleric has turned to Pope Leo XIV.

Ayatollah Seyed Mostafa Mohaghegh Damad Ahmadabadi, a prominent figure within Iran's Shia clerical establishment, wrote a public letter to Leo calling for peace and respect for international law. The appeal, framed in both moral and theological language, asks the leader of the world's Catholics to intervene with the American president and urge restraint.

For Damad, the appeal carries especially a spiritual weight. "Peace, justice, and the noble virtues of human morality are the will of God in all divine religions, sacred scriptures, and the monotheistic call for peace," he said.

Yet the letter quickly moves from theology to condemnation of the current conflict.

Damad described civilian casualties and attacks on civilian infrastructure in stark terms. "Medical, scientific, and research centers were destroyed in violation of international norms and the principle of the immunity of such places," he said.

The cleric's request to the pope is direct: "Therefore, we respectfully request that Your Holiness, by reminding him of the teachings of Jesus Christ (peace be upon him), guide him so that he refrains from committing such acts and that no more human blood be shed."



People look on and take photos as smoke rises after reported Israeli airstrikes on Shahran fuel tanks in Tehran, Iran, March 8, 2026, amid the U.S. and Israel-Iran war. (OSV News/WANA via Reuters/Majid Asgaripour)

To understand Damad's gesture, it helps to understand his place within Iran's religious establishment.

"In Iran's clerical theocracy, which is based on the teachings of Shia Islam, there are scholars who research Islamic teachings and Islamic faith and actually base their interpretations on what is included in the Quran," Kourosh Ziabari, a New York-based Iranian journalist, researcher and New Lines Magazine contributor told the National Catholic Reporter. (Ziabari provided a translation of the ayatollah's letter to NCR.)

These scholars rise through religious study and scholarship until they become authoritative figures in theology. Damad is one of them.

"Damad has always been kind of a moderate, pragmatic and somewhat reformist figure," Ziabari said.

Over the years, Damad has occasionally challenged aspects of Iran's political system from within the clerical structure itself.

Additionally, Damad has carved out a reputation as one of the more reflective voices within Iran's clerical establishment — a figure who has occasionally pushed against the ideological rigidity of the system from within its own theological language.

"He has consistently criticized the Iranian government for its behavior in the past, and tried to invite the leadership in Iran to revise their course," Ziabari said. "Through his scholarship and through his sermons, he has tried to call for a national reckoning, for a reconsideration of the dogmatic and inflexible practices that have resulted in the Iranian society being polarized along religious ideological lines."

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Some of those interventions have touched on issues that lie at the heart of Iran's political and cultural tensions. Among them is the state's enforcement of the compulsory hijab — a policy that has repeatedly sparked protests and social unrest in Iranian history.

According to Ziabari, Damad has challenged the religious basis of such coercion by returning to early Islamic history. On several occasions, he noted, the ayatollah has argued that "there is no evidence in the history of Islam, including the time of Prophet Muhammad, that he resorted to force or compulsion in order to implement the compulsory hijab or dress codes."

Yet even figures like Damad operate within a tightly controlled political environment, where criticism from inside the clerical establishment rarely translates into structural change. Reformist clerics, Ziabari suggested, are able to test the boundaries of debate — but only to a point.

As a consequence of that, on social media, the cleric has faced harsh criticism for speaking out about war while remaining largely silent about the most recent domestic repression in early January, when according to multiple international human rights organizations the Islamic regime killed thousands of protesters.

It is not the first time that Damad has written to a pope: In 2018 he addressed a letter to Pope Francis urging him to intervene against U.S. sanctions on Iran following Washington's withdrawal from the nuclear agreement, arguing that the measures were causing severe humanitarian hardship for ordinary Iranians.

Two years later, in 2020, as the COVID-19 pandemic spread, Damad again appealed to the pontiff, asking him to use his moral authority to advocate for the lifting of sanctions, warning that they were worsening shortages of medical resources and amplifying the suffering of the Iranian population.



Ayatollah Seyed Mostafa Mohaghegh Damad of Iran addresses the meeting, "Faith and Science: Towards COP26," with Pope Francis and religious leaders in the Hall of Benedictions at the Vatican Oct. 4, 2021. The meeting was part of the run-up to the U.N. Climate Change Conference, called COP26, in Glasgow, Scotland, Oct. 31 to Nov. 12, 2021. (CNS/Paul Haring)

Damad's appeals also reflect a little-known history of dialogue between the Vatican and Shia religious authorities.

"There's a long history of relationship between Tehran and the Vatican. There are strong diplomatic relations," said Fr. Christopher Clohessy, professor of Arabic and Islamic studies at the Pontifical Institute for Arabic and Islamic Studies in Rome (PISAI).

Delegations have traveled between Tehran and Rome for years, and Catholic-Shia dialogue has existed since the early 2000s.

One of the most visible moments came in 2021 when Pope Francis traveled to Iraq and met Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani in the holy city of Najaf — the first time a pope had ever met a senior Shia *marja*, one of the highest authorities in Shia Islam.

The meeting, which lasted about 45 minutes, emphasized "friendship, mutual respect and dialogue between religious communities," according to the Vatican.

Pope Francis is greeted by Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani, one of Shiite Islam's most authoritat

Pope Francis is greeted by Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani, one of Shiite Islam's most authoritative figures, during a courtesy visit in Najaf, Iraq, March 6, 2021. (CNS/Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani office)

"Since Pope Francis' extraordinary visit to Iraq and to see Ayatollah Sistani, there has been an awareness in Shia circles of the person of the pope," Clohessy told NCR.

"There seems to be a heightened awareness that the pope holds a certain sway and has certain power on the world stage," Clohessy said. "And that it might be that provokes an ayatollah to write to a religious leader of another, completely different faith."

And while the gesture signals urgency, Clohessy is skeptical about the practical effect of Damad's letter. "I can't imagine that the pope will react. I mean, it might be responded to through diplomatic channels, but I can't imagine that there will be much reaction to it."

For John L. Esposito, professor of religion and international affairs and founding director of the Alwaleed Center for Muslim-Christian Understanding at Georgetown

, Damad's message echoes an earlier reformist initiative launched by former Iranian president Mohammad Khatami, who famously called for a "dialogue of civilizations."

"He reflects that same kind of approach, which is a constructive approach to talk about relations between, if you will, the Muslim world and the West, between Muslims and Christians," Esposito said.

Damad's intellectual background also distinguishes him from many clerics.

"He is both trained in the traditional seminary and has a Ph.D. from a major university in Belgium," Esposito said.

The cleric's writings argue that there are no significant differences between Islamic law and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, an argument aimed both at domestic audiences and the broader international community, Esposito said.

Whether appeals like Damad's can translate into concrete diplomatic influence is another question. The Vatican has long cultivated a role as a moral voice in international affairs, particularly in conflicts involving religious tensions. But its actual leverage, especially in the current Middle Eastern crisis, remains uncertain.

"You would like to think that with an American pope, there would be some leverage," said Clohessy. Yet, he cautioned, the political reality in Washington may limit the reach of papal diplomacy.

"But then you have to look at the regime you're dealing with in America. It's not a normal regime," Clohessy said.

"You have a group of men, some of whom insist on their Christian faith, Catholic faith even, who are the aggressors now in a war of aggression against a country that was not the aggressor, and who are not at this stage going to listen to the papal narrative over and above the American Christian narrative, which is a right-wing fundamentalist narrative."

Clohessy recalled how, after the attacks of Sept. 11, 2001, former President George W. Bush used the word "crusade," a term that revived painful historical associations in the Muslim world.

That narrative, Clohessy argued, risks widening the gap between the Vatican's call for peace and the rhetoric circulating in parts of American political and religious life.

"My worry is that the American Christian narrative, even among some of the Catholics, some of the bishops, is not the same narrative as we're hearing from Pope Leo, that there should be peace, that there should be no aggression."

"I'm waiting to hear a mass voice of protest from the American bishops, and I've heard nothing, maybe one or two, but not a mass voice of the bishops' conference of the U.S.," Clohessy said. "I suspect that they're torn between two things, between loyalty to the administration and loyalty to Rome. And I think they're in a difficult position."

This story appears in the **War in Iran** feature series. View the full series.