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Pope's Lebanon trip could be a papal high-wire act

by John L. Allen Jr.



People gather outside Our Lady of Lebanon chapel in the village of Harissa near Beirut Aug. 18. (CNS/Reuters/Jamal Saidi)

In what may be among the most challenging voyages of his papacy, Benedict XVI is scheduled to visit Lebanon Sept. 14-16, against the backdrop of a bloody insurrection in neighboring Syria and deep tensions in Muslim/Christian relations in various parts of the world.

Vatican officials have repeatedly said that security concerns will not derail the trip, but even if the pope can be kept safe, nobody's disputing that it will be both a diplomatic and an interfaith high-wire act.

Assuming it goes ahead, the trip will mark Benedict's first visit to the Middle East since the Arab Spring, and his fourth overall to the region after Turkey in 2006, the Holy Land in 2009, and Cyprus in 2010. The official purpose is to present the conclusions from the Vatican's Synod of Bishops on the Middle East in October 2010.



Lebanon is an obvious launching pad, since Christians make up 39 percent

of the population of 4.1 million, the largest Christian footprint in percentage terms in the Middle East. Lebanon is the spiritual center of the Maronite church, which traces its roots to St. Maron, a fourth-century Syrian monk, and is the third-largest of the 22 Eastern churches in communion with Rome.

The trip unfolds amid anxiety that violence in Syria may spill across the border.

In mid-August, five predominantly Sunni Arab countries advised their nationals to leave Lebanon for fear of pro-Syrian violence by the large Shiite community. Some Lebanese citizens have been kidnapped in Syria by rebel forces on charges of supporting the Assad regime, while Shiite clans in Lebanon have grabbed Syrians on suspicions of supporting the rebels.

While Benedict has repeatedly called for an end to bloodshed in Syria, the Vatican has not taken a clear position on the controversial question of military intervention. In late July, a Vatican spokesman said the country is experiencing a "slow descent into hell," but also called the prospect of an armed international response "very worrying."

An Italian Jesuit who lived in Syria for 30 years until being expelled for supporting the anti-Assad uprising, Fr. Paolo Dall'Oglio, has criticized that seeming ambivalence. If you don't believe foreign troops sometimes have a legitimate role to play in keeping the peace, he told Vatican Radio in early August, what are the Swiss Guards doing in St. Peter's Square?

Anyone expecting a clear line from Benedict on the Syria situation may be disappointed, in part because Lebanese Christians are divided. Some, including former general and politician Michel Aoun, are allied with Hezbollah and sympathetic to Assad. Others, especially the "March 14 alliance," are strongly anti-Syrian and anti-Iranian.

That split stands in clear contrast to the last time a pope visited Lebanon.

When John Paul II arrived in 1997, the country was under Syrian occupation, and Christians were seen as the bulwark of the resistance. The Maronite leader at the time, Patriarch Nasrallah Sfeir, compared the situation to that of Poland's Catholics under the Soviets, invoking Cardinal Stefan Wyszyński's heroic defiance of communist rule.

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John Paul encouraged the analogy, welcoming opposition leaders to his events and endorsing aspirations to "freedom, sovereignty and independence." The takeaway for Christians was that John Paul wanted them to play a major political role.

Given the welter of competing Christian voices today, it would be difficult for Benedict to issue similar marching orders, even if he were so inclined. The present Maronite leader, Patriarch Bechara Boutros Rahi, is also a different figure from Sfeir, now 92 and retired. Rahi landed in hot water last year for opposing regime change in Syria, as well as seeming to accept Hezbollah's unwillingness to disarm. Rahi has subsequently backed away, trying to steer a more neutral course.

Most experts expect a largely apolitical line from Benedict, stressing a humanitarian role for Christians as reconcilers, peacemakers, and dispensers of charity across sectarian and ideological divides.

In terms of the aftermath of the Arab Spring, few expect the pope to lay out an explicit vision for the future of Middle East societies, apart from extolling religious pluralism and minority rights. Both are considered essential for the small but symbolically important Christian presence in the region, already threatened by decades of emigration.

Lebanon also affords Benedict a platform to address the broader Christian/Muslim relationship.

Since triggering a firestorm of Islamic protest in 2006 with a speech in Regensburg, Germany, appearing to link Muhammad with violence, Benedict has tried to get relations back on track. During a stop in Jordan in 2009, Benedict proposed an "alliance of civilizations," styling Christians and Muslims as natural allies in the struggle against secularism.

Some Islamic leaders in Lebanon have called for a "big welcome," but not everyone seems inclined to roll out the red carpet. Radical Islamic Sheik Omar Bakri called on Muslims in mid-August to prevent the pope, "who insulted your religion," from even entering the country.

Referring to Benedict's Regensburg speech, Bakri said, "There is no doubt the pope's remarks were ... aimed at inciting the Western world against Islam and Muslims."

In addition to those resentments, Christian/Muslim relations have also been strained by various conflicts around the world, such as the Boko Haram uprising in Nigeria. The militant Islamic group is considered responsible for 10,000 deaths over the last decade, and has made a specialty of attacking Christian targets, including bombing churches during Sunday services.

During his encounter with Islamic leaders on Sept. 15, Benedict is expected to lay out a positive vision of Christian/Muslim collaboration, but also to press for rejection of religiously motivated violence.

Finally, Benedict faces an ecumenical challenge of promoting harmony among the country's notoriously fractious patchwork of confessions, including the Maronites, the Greek Orthodox church, the Armenian Apostolic church, the Syrian Orthodox and the Assyrian church of the East.

In Lebanon, as elsewhere in the Middle East, there are also persistent intra-Catholic rivalries. At the 2010 Synod of Bishops, leaders of the Eastern churches called for an end to "confessionalism," meaning fights among themselves, but also protested what they see as a lack of respect from the dominant Latin tradition.

However trying all that seems, right now some Vatican officials are quietly saying that as long as Benedict gets in and out of Lebanon without a major security scare, and without his presence somehow adding more fuel to the fire in Syria, they'll consider it a win.

ON THE WEB

John Allen will travel with the pope covering the Sept. 14-16 trip to Lebanon. Watch the NCR website for his reports at NCRonline.org.

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