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Vatican's full-court press on Syria a remembrance of things past

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All Things Catholic

For anyone who recalls the buildup to the U.S.-led war in Iraq 10 years ago, the Vatican's reaction in recent days to the prospect of a Western military campaign in Syria can't help but feel like a remembrance of things past.

Once again, the Vatican has launched a full-court diplomatic press against a potential strike on a Middle Eastern dictatorship, one ostensibly justified by human rights abuses and the threat of nefarious weapons but also clearly calculated to promote regime change. Once again, Vatican spokesmen are warning that such an offensive could trigger a wider regional conflict, promote extremism, and make life worse for minority groups, especially Christians.

The parallel isn't exact, given that Iraq was a full-fledged ground war while President Barack Obama has pledged there will be no boots on the ground in Syria. Nonetheless, both the sequence of events and even the language being used by the Vatican today provoke a dizzying sense of *déjà vu*.

Going forward, the question is whether history will repeat itself in at least four other senses as well. First, let's recap the similarities.

As the Bush administration laid the groundwork for war in Iraq in early 2003, Pope John Paul II and the Vatican's diplomatic corps emerged as a leading critical voice of conscience. Their efforts began with three major initiatives:

- On Feb. 27, 2003, ambassadors accredited to the Holy See were urgently requested to attend a briefing with the Vatican's top diplomat, French Archbishop (now Cardinal) Jean-Louis Tauran,

who argued that war in Iraq would have unacceptable consequences for the civilian population and would inflame extremist sentiments.

- On March 2, 2003, Pope John Paul II used his Sunday Angelus address to announce that he was designating the following Wednesday, which was Ash Wednesday that year, as a special day of prayer and fasting for peace for Iraq.
- During his March 16, 2003, Angelus address, John Paul II set aside his text to speak off-the-cuff to a crowd in St. Peter's Square about his own experience of war, among other things quoting Pope Paul VI's famous maxim, "War never again."

"I belong to the generation that lived through World War II and, thanks be to God, survived it," John Paul said on March 16. "May this Lent not be remembered as a sad time of war, but as a period of courageous effort for conversion and peace."

All three of these steps have been repeated by Francis and the Vatican's current diplomatic brain trust:

- On Sunday, Pope Francis asked Catholics and non-Catholics alike to set aside tomorrow, Sept. 7, as a day of prayer and fasting for peace in Syria.
- On Thursday, ambassadors to the Holy See called in for a briefing on Syria were told by Moroccan-born Archbishop Dominique Mamberti, the Vatican's current top diplomat, that escalating the violence risks "involving not only the other countries of the region, but also unpredictable consequences in various parts of the world."
- Francis, too, has invoked the mantra of "War never again." (Reflecting the explosion of social media over the last 10 years, this time, Francis also tweeted the slogan.)

Two other echoes of the past seem clear.

First, the Vatican has taken pains not to allow its anti-war stance to be confused with coddling brutes. In 2003, John Paul II repeatedly called on Saddam Hussein to cooperate with the international community, especially U.N. arms inspectors; this time, Francis used Twitter to deliver a rebuff to Syrian President Bashar Assad, saying on Tuesday, "With utmost firmness I condemn the use of chemical weapons."

Second, the pope himself is staying on a plane of lofty moral appeals, leaving it to aides to draw specific policy conclusions. Just as John Paul II in 2003 never directly said a war in Iraq would be illegitimate but gave his blessing to subordinates such as Tauran who did, Francis this time around is allowing others to do most of the heavy rhetorical lifting.

The most explicit Francis has been so far came in a letter Wednesday to Russian President Vladimir Putin ahead of the current Group of 20 summit in which he said a military solution would be "futile." His aides have been considerably more pointed. On Aug. 31, for instance, Bishop Mario Toso of the Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace said a Western offensive in Syria would "contain all the ingredients to explode into a war of global dimensions."

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Now for four question marks about whether the script will continue to be a photocopy of the Iraq saga or whether this time around, things will unfold differently.

Papal envoy

If Francis continues to follow John Paul's playbook, his next move would be to designate a personal emissary to the White House to try to persuade the U.S. administration to exercise restraint.

A decade ago, John Paul II turned to Cardinal Pio Laghi, a veteran diplomat who had served as the papal ambassador to Washington from 1984 to 1990 and who had a strong personal relationship with the Bush family. (John Paul also dispatched an emissary to Hussein, French Cardinal Roger Etchegaray, in an effort to persuade the Iraqi leader to cooperate with U.N. inspectors.)

On March 5, 2003, Laghi met with the U.S. president, arguing that war in Iraq would lead to "suffering of the people of Iraq and those involved in the military operation, a further instability in the region, and a new gulf between Islam and Christianity."

If Francis chooses to go that route, Tauran might be the logical man to tap again. (The immediate past nuncio to the United States, Italian Archbishop Pietro Sambi, who was well-respected in the Obama White House, died in 2011.) Among other things, Tauran, now president of the Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue, would be in a unique position to gently remind Obama that looking back, most of the Vatican's warnings about Iraq came to pass.

Given the difference in the politics today, Tauran's nationality wouldn't be a handicap. Ten years ago the French weren't on board with the Iraq war, so sending a Frenchman to meet Bush was a nonstarter. Today, the French are among the most aggressive voices calling for military action in Syria, so Obama and his advisers see them as allies.

Ambassador's pushback

During the Iraq conflict, the Bush administration's envoy to the Vatican was Jim Nicholson, a West Point graduate and veteran of the Vietnam War (where he earned a series of decorations) as well the former chair of the Republican National Committee.

Given that résumé, Nicholson had both the military background and the political juice to be a vocal advocate for his administration's policies, often pushing back against what he considered to be pious but naïve Vatican rhetoric or knee-jerk European objections to American policy.

Nicholson never succeeded in persuading the Vatican of the merits of the war, but he did make sure the case was clearly heard, both in the Holy See itself and in the global media based in Rome.

In February 2003, for instance, Nicholson brought American Catholic intellectual Michael Novak to Rome for a round of speeches, media interviews and meetings with Vatican officials, laying out the case for intervention in Iraq as a legitimate act of self-defense connected to the war on terrorism.

Novak also suggested that some Vatican commentary on the war had been "a little bit emotionally anti-American."

Because John Paul II never explicitly said the war in Iraq was immoral, Nicholson also had some luck playing the "prudential judgment" card, framing the Vatican's warnings as cautions rather than condemnations -- in colloquial terms, as a yellow light rather than a red.

Throughout the conflict and its aftermath, Nicholson continued to press that case. The result was that the U.S. ambassador to the Vatican became a significant player in the drama.

It remains to be seen whether Obama's new ambassador to the Vatican, former Catholic Relief Services

president Ken Hackett, will play the same sort of role should the administration opt to press ahead in Syria.

The Senate confirmed Hackett on Aug. 1 but has not yet formally presented his credentials to the pope. (In context, by the way, that ought to be a terrifically interesting conversation.)

Given his experience at CRS, Hackett knows the international landscape, and he's also an articulate and forceful advocate. To what extent he'll replicate Nicholson's visibility, however, isn't yet clear, in part because Hackett may not have quite the same freedom of action that a personal friend of the president and former chair of his party enjoyed. It's also not a given that Hackett would feel the same personal commitment to defending this conflict that Nicholson did for the Iraq War.

U.S. bishops

Last time around, there was a perception in some quarters that the U.S. bishops didn't fully follow the lead of the pope and the Vatican. Bishop Robert Lynch of St. Petersburg, Fla., went further, writing on his blog Sunday that "the Catholic Church in the United States sadly gave President George W. Bush largely a free pass" and that the bishops "did not even react strongly in defense of Blessed John Paul II" in his efforts to prevent the war.

They said the right things, including a November 2002 statement that all but asserted that a U.S.-led conflict in Iraq would not meet the tests of a "just war." Yet critics insisted that the bishops didn't push this position with the same vigor they applied to debates over abortion and gay marriage.

In part, that may be because furor over whether pro-choice Catholic politicians should be denied Communion was reaching a boil ahead of the 2004 elections. In part, too, commentary from the bishops had to take account of American public opinion, especially in that brief window immediately after the war, when it seemed a military success.

Moreover, the bishops were a bit shellshocked in late 2002 and early 2003 by the explosion of the child sexual abuse scandals, and some may have felt understandably hesitant about projecting themselves into national debates as moral authorities.

Whatever the reasons and however unfair it may have been on substance, conventional wisdom was that the U.S. bishops were more muted than the Vatican. The question now is whether they'll provide fodder for critics to level a similar charge this time around.

On Tuesday, Cardinal Timothy Dolan of New York, president of the bishops' conference, and Bishop Richard Pates of Des Moines, Iowa, chair of the Committee on International Justice and Peace, issued a statement joining the pope's call for a day of prayer for peace, and many U.S. dioceses have organized services.

In Washington, Cardinal Donald Wuerl will celebrate a Mass for Peace and Justice on Saturday at the Basilica of the National Shrine of the Immaculate Conception. Archbishop Carlo Maria Viganò, the pope's ambassador, will be there, along with Msgr. Ronny Jenkins, the General Secretary for the bishops' conference.

Going forward, three factors may induce the U.S. bishops to be more forceful this time.

First, public opinion is more anti-war than a decade ago, when post-9/11 anger still drove much of the foreign policy discussion. A Pew Forum survey released Wednesday found that only 29 percent of

Americans favor military strikes in Syria. A separate ABC/Washington Post poll found six in 10 Americans oppose unilateral U.S. strikes, and 70 percent are against supplying weapons to the Syrian rebels.

Second, the bishops already have a fairly ambivalent relationship with the Obama administration, so there may not be the same concern about squandering goodwill. Some bishops frustrated with accusations of partisanship may actually relish the opportunity to stake out a position from what will be perceived as the left -- i.e., opposed to war -- rather than the right.

Third, and perhaps most fundamentally, the bishops have cemented religious freedom as a towering priority in a way that was just coming into focus a decade ago. As part of that landscape, they have become much more sensitive to anti-Christian persecution around the world, perhaps especially in the Middle East.

The bishops know Christians were among the primary victims of the chaos that followed the fall of the Hussein regime in Iraq, and they're hearing similar warnings today from the Christian leadership of Syria.

Chaldean Catholic Bishop Antoine Audo of Aleppo, for instance, said the following in a recent interview: "We heard a lot about democracy and freedom from the U.S. in Iraq, and we see now the results -- how the country came to be destroyed. The first to lose were the Christians of Iraq. We must say that, what the U.S. did in Iraq, we don't want repeated in Syria."

That's a message that ought to carry weight with his fellow prelates in the States.

Outcome

Ultimately, the biggest question mark is whether the current U.S. administration will be any more sensitive to warnings from the pope, the Vatican, the U.S. bishops and Christians on the ground than its predecessor was.

When Laghi returned from his mission to Washington in 2003, he spoke on background to a few reporters in Rome, saying, in essence, it had been a waste of time because Bush was already committed to war. Famously, Laghi accused the administration of having a Calvinist view of the Iraq conflict, in which the elect were squared off against the reprobate.

So far, the odds don't seem especially good Francis and his team will have more luck.

The Obama administration is conducting a strong lobbying campaign in favor of military intervention, so politically, any retreat now runs the risk of appearing weak.

Moreover, if ever there was an American administration that one might have thought would listen attentively to the pope, it was the Bush White House. By 2003, Bush had already visited John Paul II twice in Rome and would do so again in June 2004 to present him with the Medal of Freedom. Aside from Bush's genuine admiration for the pontiff, winning the Catholic vote was also a core element of his re-election strategy.

If a president who basically wrapped himself in the papal flag was nevertheless ready to go to war over his objections, what basis is there to think a Democratic administration with a notoriously strained relationship with the church will take the pope more seriously?

On the other hand, there are two wild cards that could still come into play.

First, Francis enjoys high approval ratings and has put a considerable amount of political capital into the bank. The six-month anniversary of his election is coming up, and media organizations are likely to offer significant coverage to mark the occasion. That spotlight may afford him a greater opportunity to shape the debate.

On a related note, major media outlets in the United States a decade ago had already committed to the narrative of John Paul II as a staunch conservative allied with the Bush White House, and took it some time for them to catch up to the reality that on this score, at least, that storyline didn't work.

Generally speaking, the media hasn't yet committed to a similar narrative about Francis. His message on Syria, therefore, may find a more ready echo chamber.

Second, unlike Bush in 2003, Obama in 2013 doesn't have one eye on a re-election campaign. Because this conflict is unfolding in his second term, his calculus, at least in theory, can be more about long-term legacy than short-term politics.

In that context, perhaps the voice of Syria's Christian minority, amplified by the pope and the Vatican's diplomatic apparatus, stands a slightly greater chance of making a difference -- if not in preventing a first round of strikes, perhaps in helping to shape the aftermath. As the Italians would say, *vedremo* -- we shall see.

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