

Quick Thoughts: Paul Sedra on the Pope's Visit to the Middle East

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Photo by: A welcome banner for Pope Francis with his picture hangs on a building in the West Bank city of Bethlehem on 19 May 2014. Image by Nasser Nasser via Associated Press

[On Saturday 24 May 2014, Pope Francis embarks on a three-day visit to Jordan, Israel and the occupied Palestinian territories in his first tour of the Middle East since his installation as head of the Catholic Church in 2013. Jadaliyya asked its Contributing Editor Paul Sedra to reflect on the broader issues the pope is expected to address, including the position of Christians in the Middle East.]

Vatican watchers and Middle East analysts alike will examine the Pope's movements and statements intently, much as they have already examined the planned composition of his delegation for purported indications of Francis's political leanings. Indeed, former leaders of the Jewish and Muslim communities in Argentina will accompany the Pope on his visit, as will the Maronite Patriarch. Notably, this is the first time a Maronite Patriarch, who is based in Lebanon, will visit the State of Israel since its creation in 1948.

Although extremely brief, the pope's visit is seen as potentially touching upon a wide range of sensitive political issues—not the least of which is the increasing sense of insecurity that has prevailed among Middle Eastern Christians in recent years, particularly since the Arab uprisings of 2011. The political or military ascendancy of Islamist forces in Arab states like

Egypt, Syria, Iraq, and Libya has spawned significant episodes of sectarian violence, to the point that Pope Francis last November ventured to comment, “We will not resign ourselves to imagining a Middle East without Christians.”

There is no question that sectarian violence is an issue that Arab governments need to address with urgency. What I find problematic in much of the current discussion around Christian insecurity in the Middle East is the oft-held assumption that ecclesiastical authorities—like Pope Francis, or the Maronite Patriarch—have a central role to play in drawing attention to this issue. Indeed, Western observers of the Middle East frequently assume that spiritual leaders are the natural leaders of Arab Christian communities, and that ultimate responsibility for representing Arab Christians falls on the shoulders of assorted bishops and patriarchs.

In my view looking to ecclesiastical authorities for political leadership is part of the problem, not the solution. And on this score I draw guidance from the case with which I am most familiar—that of Coptic Orthodox Christians in Egypt.

At the time of Egypt’s military coup on 3 July 2013, General Abd al-Fattah al-Sisi made a point of positioning the Coptic Orthodox Patriarch, Tawadros II, at his side as he announced the deposition of President Muhammad Morsi. The implicit assumption in this display was that Pope Tawadros endorsed the coup on behalf of the Coptic Christian community in Egypt. That he could adopt this role was the legacy of a fifty-year partnership between the Coptic Church and the Egyptian state, which acknowledged the Coptic pope as not just a spiritual leader but a political one as well.

During the 1940s and 1950s, the Coptic pope held no such political role, and responsibility for representing the community fell to laymen, usually lawyers and landowners, the scions of powerful notable families. After the 1952 revolution, Gamal Abdel Nasser was loathe to cooperate with these collaborators with the old regime, and turned instead to the hierarchy of the Coptic Church to represent the interests of the Coptic community.

The leaders of the Church welcomed the recognition and resources that this direct relationship with the state produced. The problem was, and remains, that political leadership concentrated in the hands of clerics only sharpens the sense of sectarian divide. The televised announcement of the 2013 coup was a case in point: The ringing endorsement of Sisi by Tawadros constructed, by design and default, the notion that the Coptic community as a whole, and on account of its Christian identity, stood with the military

against the Muslim Brotherhood.

What if Pope Tawadros were to withdraw from politics altogether, and refuse to comment on political issues? Most Copts have forgotten that there was a time in which their pope was not the political figure he is today—that there once existed a Coptic political leadership independent of the pope and the church institution. The pope's withdrawal from politics would allow for the re-emergence of a non-clerical leadership of the community—and, in turn, a less polarizing sectarian climate.

All in all, we would do well to recall that bishops, patriarchs, and popes are not the natural leaders of Middle East Christians. And to expect ecclesiastical leaders like Pope Francis to defend their parishioners against the rise of Islamists is the ultimate sectarian Catch-22.