



Abrahamic Dialogue in the Shadow of War. The Israel-Hamas war creates new challenges for Vatican diplomacy.

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February 16, 2024. In February 2023, global religious leaders met in the United Arab Emirates to celebrate the opening of the Abrahamic Family House, a soaring multifaith complex encompassing a mosque, a church, and a synagogue. The grand opening came exactly four years after Pope Francis travelled to Abu Dhabi to sign a Document on Human Fraternity with Grand Imam Al-Tayeb of Al-Azhar, an event which marked a high point in international religious diplomacy.

But now, a year later, the Israel-Hamas war has created new challenges for high-level Abrahamic dialogue as well as for Vatican diplomacy.

On October 7, 2023, shortly after the massacre of about 1,200 civilians in Israel, Al-Azhar, a leading global center of Islamic learning, praised Hamas fighters who died in the attack as “great martyrs of Palestine.” Since then, Imam Al-Tayeb and Al-Azhar have joined a growing chorus of Muslim leaders criticizing Israel’s air assault and ground war in Gaza as a campaign of genocide against the Palestinian people. With the Israeli offensive underway and civilian deaths mounting, Vatican Secretary of State Pietro Parolin decried Hamas’s “terrorist attack” and called for a proportional response. In late October Pope Francis told the Israeli President Isaac Herzog in a private phone call that it is “forbidden to respond to terror with terror”—a sentiment he subsequently repeated in public. In December, Israeli Chief Rabbi David Lau chided Francis for associating Israel with terrorism, insisting that “we are doing everything possible to prevent and reduce harm to civilians.” Jewish leaders worldwide have vehemently rejected charges of genocide as both false and antisemitic.

The Israel-Hamas war illustrates the fragility of interfaith diplomacy. Whatever its theological, cultural, and political significance, high-level interreligious dialogue has limited impact amid clashing territorial claims, rival historical grievances, and brutal violence. The limits of interfaith diplomacy are particularly evident in the context of Israel and Palestine, where religious and political differences have historically reinforced one another. Jewish, Muslim, and Christian leaders may all adhere to monotheism and consider Abraham a common ancestor, but they bring very different perspectives to the region. For religious Jews, the land of Israel is a divine inheritance. Muslim solidarity with Palestinians is reinforced by the holy status of Jerusalem in the Islamic tradition. Christian leaders often express both sympathy for Palestinian co-religionists and recognize Israel as a Jewish homeland against the historical backdrop of the crime of the Holocaust perpetrated in a Christian-majority Europe.

For Francis, who has made interreligious and intercultural understanding a hallmark of his papacy, the Israel-Hamas war represents a particularly difficult challenge. Since becoming pope in 2013 he has called for a “culture of encounter” marked by dialogue and cooperation across religious, national, and ideological divides. A major emphasis of Francis’s approach to dialogue has been to seek spiritual and theological points of contact with other traditions, but he insists that interfaith dialogue must also encompass the practical aspects of accompaniment and not shy away from

divisive issues. “Encounter,” with its Latin root *contra* (against, opposite), implies a readiness to acknowledge and address difference. A second emphasis of his approach to dialogue is an insistence on global humanity as the frame of reference. *Laudato si'*, for example, called on the international community to come together to tackle the climate crisis. In *Fratelli tutti*, Francis emphasized our obligations to one another around other global challenges from war and terrorism to refugees, social inequality, and the Covid-19 pandemic.

Both these elements of Francis’s approach to interfaith dialogue—theological openness and a global horizon—have figured centrally in outreach to Muslims that culminated in the 2019 Document on Human Fraternity and Vatican endorsement of the Abrahamic Family House project. Francis’s historic 2017 trip to Cairo and Al-Azhar, where he deepened his relationship with Al-Tayeb, proved a critical juncture. “Without giving in to forms of facile syncretism,” he told his audience at Al-Azhar, “our task is that of praying for one another, imploring from God the gift of peace, encountering one another, engaging in dialogue and promoting harmony in the spirit of cooperation and friendship.” Francis reiterated these convictions on subsequent trips to the UAE, Morocco, Iraq, and Bahrain. Perhaps the most vivid expression of his openness to Islam is the remarkable assertion in the Document on Human Fraternity that “[t]he pluralism and the diversity of religions, colour, sex, race and language are willed by God in His wisdom”—an idea expressed directly in the Qur’an but not in the Bible. *Fratelli tutti* makes multiple positive references to the document and to Al-Tayeb personally, an unprecedented interfaith gesture in an encyclical.

Theological openness and a global frame have also characterized Francis’s personal relationship with Jews. As archbishop of Buenos Aires, Francis developed a close friendship with Rabbi Abraham Skorka, one of the leaders of the Jewish community in Argentina. Early in his pontificate Francis made a journey to Israel, where he visited the Yad Vashem Holocaust Memorial, prayed at the Western Wall, and emphasized “the journey of friendship” that Catholics and Jews travelled together since the Church embraced interfaith dialogue at the Second Vatican Council with the 1965 Declaration *Nostra Aetate*. During a 2016 visit to the Rome Synagogue Francis underscored that “the theological dimension of the Jewish-Catholic dialogue deserves to be deepened further” and recalled that “[t]he Shoah teaches us to always maintain the highest level of vigilance, in order to be able to intervene immediately in defence of human dignity and peace.” He has decried the worldwide upsurge in antisemitism in recent years.

The Israel-Hamas war has complicated Francis’s interfaith efforts. At the diplomatic level, his response has exhibited continuity overall: the Vatican has reiterated its longstanding support for a two-state solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict with security guarantees for both sides, protections for religious freedom and Christian minorities, and access for adherents of all three Abrahamic faiths to holy sites in Jerusalem. Francis’s calls for an immediate ceasefire echo the Vatican’s general opposition to the use of violence. At the same time, new challenges arising from the specific character of the current war—the Hamas massacre and the scale of the Israeli military response—have generated two different sets of interfaith tensions.

The tensions with Israeli and Jewish leaders have been out in the open. Francis’s admonition to President Isaac Herzog that Israel should not fight terror with terror, and his insistence on meeting in the Vatican not only with the families of Israeli hostages but also with Palestinians with family members suffering in Gaza, drew criticism from Jewish leaders in Israel and around the world. The Council of the Assembly of Rabbis in Italy, for example, wondered “what purpose decades of Christian-Jewish dialogue have served by talking about friendship and brotherhood if then, in reality, when there are those who try to exterminate the Jews, instead of receiving expressions of closeness and understanding the response is that of diplomatic acrobatics, balancing acts and icy equidistance.”

While Pope Francis is no doubt engaged in a difficult balancing act, the Vatican has in fact directed more criticism at Hamas than at Israel. Parolin called Hamas’s actions on October 7 “a terrorist

attack” and “inhuman” even as he admonished Israel to be proportionate in its response. In his Christmas *Urbi et Orbi* message, Pope Francis decried the “the abominable attack of 7 October” but referenced Israeli responsibility for civilian deaths more obliquely, calling for “an end to the military operations with their appalling harvest of innocent civilian victims.” In a January audience with diplomats he returned to the Hamas assault, renewing his “condemnation of this act and of every instance of terrorism and extremism.” As the international condemnation of the Israeli campaign in Gaza has swelled, the Vatican has avoided any use of the word “genocide.” But careful rhetoric and media relations, along with a letter from Francis to “My Jewish Brothers and Sisters in Israel” in early February, have not assuaged critics in the Jewish community. The fact that the Vatican has not yet criticized others’ use of the term genocide, with its implicit comparison between Israel’s military campaign and the Holocaust, may burden Catholic-Jewish relations into the future.

The challenge posed by the Israel-Hamas war for Francis’s relations with Muslim leaders is very different. The Al-Azhar response to the Hamas massacre of Israeli civilians – praising the dead assailants as martyrs—is hard to square with the Document on Human Fraternity’s call on leaders “to stop using religions to incite hatred, violence, extremism and blind fanaticism, and to refrain from using the name of God to justify acts of murder, exile, terrorism and oppression.” The Vatican has not commented publicly on Al-Azhar’s praise for the Hamas assault and its references to Israel as a “terrorist Zionist entity” bent on genocide. This may make sense from a diplomatic point of view, given Muslim outrage at the ongoing Israeli occupation, the civilian death toll in Gaza, and the importance of the relationship with Al-Azhar. But the gap between the rhetoric of the Document on Human Fraternity, with its opposition to any religious incitement of violence, and the realities of the Israel-Hamas war demonstrate the fragility of interfaith diplomacy.

Despite these challenges, the limited impact of interfaith dialogue in wartime is no reason to abandon statements like the Document on Human Fraternity or projects like the Abrahamic Family House. Once the fighting in Gaza stops, and if there is progress toward a two-state solution, interfaith diplomacy may serve as one of the foundations for a lasting peace.

The 2020 Abraham Accords, which normalized ties between Israel, the UAE, and Bahrain, represent a hopeful point of departure. The Abrahamic Accords Declaration, signed by all parties to the agreements, encouraged “efforts to promote interfaith and intercultural dialogue to advance a culture of peace among the three Abrahamic religions and all humanity.” A remarkable passage in the bilateral Israel-UAE agreement went further: “Arab and Jewish peoples are descendants of a common ancestor, Abraham, and inspired, in that spirit, to foster in the Middle East a reality in which Muslims, Jews, Christians and peoples of all faiths, denominations, beliefs and nationalities live in, and are committed to, a spirit of coexistence, mutual understanding and mutual respect.” The Accords were criticized at the time for bracketing the issue of Palestinian self-determination. Should progress towards a two-state solution with mutual security guarantees prove possible in the aftermath of the Gaza war, the normalization of Israeli relations with Saudi Arabia and other Arab- and Muslim-majority states may follow, providing an impetus for “a culture of peace” supported by leaders across the three Abrahamic communities.

As critics of interfaith diplomacy have pointed out, it is cooperation among religious communities at the national and local levels that has the most direct impact on the ground. But international interfaith meetings and declarations do matter in the long run by providing a normative framework and point of reference for such efforts. Over the past two decades, for example, local Jewish, Muslim, and Christian leaders in and around Jerusalem have fought against political headwinds to advance cooperation, particularly around holy sites. If a regional peace within an Abrahamic framework supported by global religious leaders could be established, such local interfaith efforts will be more likely to bear fruit in the future.

In the meantime, Pope Francis will have to address inevitable tensions with Jewish and Muslim

leaders around the Israel-Hamas war and its immediate aftermath. His strong commitment to Abrahamic dialogue may not have any direct or immediate impact on the postwar settlement. But his approach, with its emphasis on theological openness and a global horizon, is designed for the long term. For Francis, building a culture of encounter involves patience in the face of complex and stubborn realities. In the 2013 apostolic exhortation *Evangelii gaudium*, he rejected easy or hasty solutions, advocating instead “actions which generate new processes in society and engage other persons and groups who can develop them to the point where they bear fruit in significant historical events.” When it comes to interreligious diplomacy as a force for peace, perseverance in dialogue, however difficult, is the only way forward.

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