

# UNITED ARAB EMIRATES: Pope Francis, and the west, should be wary of the UAE's tolerance agenda

*The papal visit is a breakthrough for religious tolerance in the heart of the Muslim world, but severe problems there persist.*

By Nina Shea

National Review (05.02.2019) – <https://bit.ly/2RIp2m0> – On Sunday, February 3, history was made when Pope Francis landed in the United Arab Emirates, marking the first time any pope has been permitted to set foot anywhere on the Arabian Peninsula in over a thousand years. The papal visit is a breakthrough for religious tolerance in the heart of the Muslim world. But all the hype and hoopla attending it and the risible boasts of openness by the UAE government should not blind us to severe problems that persist.

By the end of his three-day visit, the pope will have been welcomed by the crown prince at the presidential palace, joined by the grand mufti of Al Azhar to sign a document on “human fraternity for world peace and living together,” and invited to dialogue with the local Muslim Council of Elders. It will have culminated in an open-air Mass at which he presided before 120,000 Christians in Abu Dhabi's Zayed Sports City Stadium. While small by the standards of other

papal trips – the Mass in Panama last month had 400,000 in attendance – this will be the largest public Christian worship service held on the peninsula since Islam took hold there in the seventh century.

The UAE is using the occasion to declare 2019 “the Year of Tolerance,” announce a Festival of Tolerance, establish a new cabinet post for a minister of tolerance, and open a state Internet portal on tolerance. In an attempt to rebrand itself as religiously tolerant, it has brought in planes filled with Western opinion-makers, think-tank scholars, and envoys to observe these efforts. It is the UAE’s spiritual equivalent to its flashy displays of modern wealth – the over-the-top shopping malls replete with ski resorts, the palm-tree-shaped man-made luxury islands, etc.

On one hand, this is real progress. It further erodes an ancient taboo against religious freedom on the Arabian Peninsula. Attributed to Islam’s Prophet Mohammed, tradition holds that no religion other than Islam is permissible there. For many centuries none was. Christianity had once been well established in the region, and the ruins of a sixth-century Christian monastery can still be seen on the UAE’s Sir Bani Yas Island. But by the eighth century, all churches and Christian communities had disappeared. Even now few nationals of the UAE or in any other of the Arabian Peninsula countries dare openly profess a faith other than Islam.

Without taking into account Saudi Arabia, the UAE’s neighbor and closest ally, it is impossible to assess the UAE’s new cultural campaign. When I visited Riyadh in 2011 as a commissioner on the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF), the director of the official Saudi National

Human Rights Commission explained that churches are forbidden in his country because all of it is “a sacred mosque” for Islam’s holiest shrines in Mecca and Medina—two cities completely closed to non-Muslims. That has not changed. As recently as 2015, Grand Mufti Abdul-Aziz ibn Abdullah Al ash-Sheikh, Saudi Arabia’s chief religious and legal authority, openly declared that all churches in the entire peninsula region should be destroyed. The Saudi cabinet shakeup after the Khashoggi murder scandal did not touch the grand mufti – he remains in that office to this day. Saudi Arabia’s intolerant policies are reinforced by the government’s educational system, in which there is “a troubling rise in intolerant content in Saudi textbooks promoting hatred and violence” against non-Muslims, women, and gays, according to a recent USCIRF report.

In this context, that the UAE celebrates the arrival of the Catholic pope and allows some churches and a public worship service for its non-Muslim foreign workers is a significant development. But, by wrapping itself in the mantle of religious tolerance, the UAE invites closer scrutiny, on its own terms. It bears noting, for example, that in a recent Pew Research Center index the UAE is ranked “high” for government restrictions on religion. And in 2018 it ranked 45th among the world’s top 50 religious persecutors, according to the respected Christian advocacy group Open Doors. The UAE looks good compared with Saudi Arabia, but it is hardly a paragon of religious tolerance and freedom.

The UAE, like the rest of the Gulf, employs millions of foreign workers, including nearly a million Christians, who account for 12 percent of the population, rivaling the number of its Muslim nationals; almost 90 percent of the country’s population consists of expatriates. The Christians among them

are afforded few rights. Since the 1960s, they have been permitted churches and schools, but in severely limited numbers.

By far the largest Christian community in the UAE is the Catholic, which counts 870,000 members. Their 150 nationalities are reflected in the Mass schedules – English, Tagalog, Arabic, Malayalam, Konkani, Tamil, Urdu, Spanish, Korean, etc. Their worship services have been described as exuberant, and the churches function as social-support centers for these sojourners on temporary work visas, who exist on the margins of UAE national life. Some observers say this is freedom of worship. But it is more like token tolerance. In reality, only a small fraction of Catholics in the UAE can go to church. Half a century ago the government adopted a policy to allow churches but since then has permitted only nine Catholic churches to be built, or one church for every 100,000 Catholics.

Catholic services outside these churches are illegal. Church exteriors must be stripped of their crosses, bells, and all Christian imagery. Religious literature is restricted. Evangelization is banned and blasphemy against Islam is a crime. Anti-Semitism is promoted. Islam itself is tightly restricted: The imams are employed by the state, and the content of Friday mosque sermons is prescribed by the government. Nationals are not free to choose a religion other than Islam.

The seven federated emirates of the UAE remain under authoritarian governance that curbs religious freedom along with free speech, due process, and other basic rights. Its growing tolerance of Christian churches and Sikh and Hindu

temples within its territory is delivered as a top-down “privilege” rather than respected as a guaranteed democratic right. This means that the evolution of religious freedom in this region is not inevitable.

In the events this week, the UAE is acting as Saudi Arabia’s more liberal alter ego. At a time when American support for Saudi Arabia is wearing thin, these Gulf countries are anxious to shore it up by having the UAE show a modicum of the religious tolerance that Saudi Arabia has promised but failed to deliver. The West should commend the UAE at this time but keep it in perspective.

Pope Francis comes to Abu Dhabi hoping for more churches on the Arabian Peninsula and desperate for dignity and respect for all humanity throughout the larger Muslim world. The Catholic Church and other Christian communities in Iraq and Syria are struggling to recover from genocide that was supported by nations in the Gulf. Sunni intolerance continues to threaten Catholic and other Christian communities in Asia and Africa. During a Mass only last Sunday, ISIS blew up a Catholic cathedral in the Philippines.

For this papal visit, Bishop Paul Hinder, apostolic vicar for Southern Arabia, has adopted a theme from the opening line of the Prayer of Saint Francis of Assisi: “Make me a channel of your peace!” Saint Francis braved shipwreck, beatings, and a perilous journey through the battlefield of the Fifth Crusade to meet with the sultan of Egypt, to build greater human understanding and peace with the Muslim world. Eight hundred years later, the great saint’s papal namesake seeks, in his own way, the same from the Muslim leaders of our own day. The rest of the West should too.

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## **PAKISTAN: The lessons of the Asia Bibi case**

*Pakistan has released the purported blasphemer against Islam. Now what nation will have the courage to grant her asylum?*

By Nina Shea

National Review (16.11.2018) – <https://bit.ly/2A0wodU> – Asia Bibi, the Catholic mother imprisoned in Pakistan for nine years and condemned to hang for violating that country's strict blasphemy law, has drawn broad sympathy throughout the West. Lacking credible evidence, and despite her denials,

lower courts plainly yielded to Islamist pressure in making the illiterate field hand the first Pakistani woman to be given a death sentence for insulting Islam's prophet, Mohammed. Then on October 31, Bibi finally received justice in an acquittal by Pakistan's supreme court. But when she was released a week later, she found that mobs were buying for her blood throughout Pakistan – and, most surprisingly, that the West held out no firm offer of a safe haven.

Islamabad has given assurances that Bibi has been taken to a secret, secure location inside Pakistan, pending a permanent place of refuge. But her escape seems stalled. The West's response so far of passive hand-wringing while Bibi faces mortal danger indicates more than poor planning; it shows a failure to fully comprehend the deeply radicalizing effects of the blasphemy taboo within the world's second-largest Muslim nation – and the inroads it has made in the West.

Western leaders have consistently expressed concern for Bibi during her nearly decade-long ordeal. Human-rights advocates, such as the indefatigable Lord David Alton, who just last month met personally in Pakistan with the chief justice, have vigorously championed Bibi in the British parliament. Yet when the moment of truth arrived, London quickly decided it would not give her asylum owing to security concerns. The U.K. has its own radical Islamist leaders within its million-strong Pakistani community to worry about, including Anjem Choudary, paroled last month following a terror-law conviction. Lord Alton called the British decision “craven.”

In Paris, the city hall had an enlarged photo of Bibi by its front entrance when I last visited several years ago, and France has long been discussed as a place of asylum for her.

But deadly Islamist attacks against Charlie Hebdo's editors for blasphemy, and most recently against French Jews, make asylum there unthinkable. Last week Italy and Canada revealed their engagement in "sensitive" multilateral talks on Bibi's case, but so far neither has offered an actual legal grant of asylum. Also last week, Prime Minister Justin Trudeau apologized for Canada's turning away the MS St. Louis and its 907 desperate Jewish passengers seeking refuge from German Nazis 79 years ago. Hopefully, he will apply the St. Louis lesson to throw a lifeline to Bibi.

A recent appeal on Bibi's behalf by 190 European parliamentarians demands her safe passage from Pakistan but says nothing specific about where she can go next. The European countries most welcoming to refugees – the Scandinavian states, Germany, the Netherlands – all have a recent history of Islamist rioting and murder over perceived blasphemy against Islam: by irreverent cartoons, Theo van Gogh and Ayaan Hirsi Ali's film on the treatment of women, a papal speech at Regensburg University, etc. Providing indefinite, round-the-clock security to a marked person such as Bibi would be costly, as the U.K. learned with Salman Rushdie. And Amsterdam has already had to withdraw much of its embassy staff from Pakistan this week following threats received after the nation granted asylum to Bibi's lawyer and the Dutch politician Geert Wilders mocked the Muslim prophet on Twitter.

In a landmark blasphemy case in October, the European Court for Human Rights upheld an Austrian court's conviction of a political activist on charges similar to Bibi's, albeit they don't carry the death penalty. For the sake of keeping social peace, Europe's highest civil-rights court validated that country's interest in criminalizing speech that "defames" the prophet Mohammed and in establishing a right to have



“religious feelings protected.” The Austrian defendant had criticized the prophet as a “pedophile” for marrying a six-year-old; Bibi’s alleged insult is not disclosed, since repeating it would be deemed another act of blasphemy in Pakistan.

In truth, the anti-blasphemy movement went international several decades ago. After Iran’s Ayatollah Khomeini issued a fatwa in 1989 against anyone connected with Rushdie’s novel *The Satanic Verses*, several of its editors, translators, and sellers were either attacked or murdered in Japan, the United States, Norway, and Turkey. The Saudi-based Organization of Islamic Cooperation leveraged the 2005 Danish cartoon crisis to get Europe to police speech to protect Islam. Since then, the EU has adopted hate-speech bans on anything deemed Islamophobic by anyone. (Charges in the Austria case were brought by a secular magazine, not Muslims.)

Europe is trying to placate the Islamists by giving in on the blasphemy issue, but Bibi’s experience is a case study on how legitimizing religious speech taboos only fans the flames.

Bibi was arrested in 2009 after she triggered a dispute with Muslim women when she, an “infidel,” took a sip of water from a communal cup while harvesting a hot field. The Muslim women accused Bibi of blaspheming their prophet during the course of this heated exchange. At trial, the Muslim berry pickers gave conflicting testimony and were manipulated by a local imam – facts that were overlooked by the trial court and Bibi’s devastatingly inexperienced trial attorney but would be determinative for the supreme court. In 2010, Bibi was convicted and sentenced under section 295-C of the 1986 blasphemy law. For her own protection, she was confined in an

isolation cell, where she cooked her own food to avoid poisoning.

With the blasphemy law already infamous as an oppressive tool for settling personal scores against Christians and other minorities, Asia Bibi attracted the sympathy of Punjab's governor, Salman Taseer, and Pakistan's minorities minister, Shahbaz Bhatti. Both were assassinated in 2011. The murder of Bhatti, a Christian, occurred with impunity, while Mumtaz Qadri, the killer of the Muslim governor, was arrested, tried, and sentenced to death, whereupon he became lionized as a martyr for the faith.

Qadri's fans include a large part of the Pakistani lawyers' association, whose members, in their trademark black suits, showered rose petals on him as he entered the courthouse. They volunteered by the hundred to defend him pro bono. In 2008, this same lawyers' association was enthusiastically cited by the New York Times as a hopeful sign for upholding Pakistan's liberal tradition," and as "perhaps the most consequential outpouring of liberal, democratic energy in the Islamic world in recent years." But as lawyers rallied around the blasphemy issue, it became deeply illiberal. Saiful Mulook, one of the last of the true liberals, who represented Bibi in her appeal, had to flee for his life last week and go to the Netherlands.

Another figure inspired by Qadri is hardline cleric Khadim Rizvi, who organized Tehreek-eLabbaik (TLP), a burgeoning political party centered on fighting blasphemy against Islam. Last week TLP incited massive protests against Bibi in Islamabad, Lahore, and Karachi, paralyzing key transportation routes. To restore order, the government blocked cellphone service and social media throughout the country for three

days. Prime Minister Imran Khan also reportedly gave Rizvi a chance to appeal the supreme court's decision to release Bibi and promised to block her from leaving the country. Meanwhile, Rizvi has been calling for the murder of the judges, It's not clear what the prime minister will do if Bibi gets an actual visa and promise of asylum from the United States, for example. So far he hasn't had to cross that bridge.

Bibi's husband, Ashiq Massih, told me two and a half years ago, after a conference – held in New York and sponsored by the Holy See – on persecution that Pakistan's supreme court wanted to release his wife but, concerned about anti-blasphemy rioting, was waiting “until things cooled down.” The court, tired of waiting, finally released Bibi last week, and Pakistan's ensuing descent into radicalism, wholly separate from the Taliban, has been on full display. Asia Bibi is the litmus test of whether the United States and the rest of the West are really willing to defend persecuted religious minorities around the world.

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