

Pope in historic UAE visit urges faith leaders to reject war

By NICOLE WINFIELD and JON GAMBRELL
Associated Press

ABU DHABI, United Arab Emirates — Pope Francis urged religious leaders today to work together to reject the “miserable crudeness” of war as he opened the first-ever papal visit to the Arabian Peninsula, the birthplace of Islam, with a strong denunciation of violence committed in God’s name.

In a keynote speech to an interfaith gathering in the United Arab Emirates, Francis warned that the future of humanity was at stake unless religions come together to resist the “logic of armed power ... the arming of borders, the raising of walls.”

“There is no alternative: we will either build the future together or there will not be a future,” Francis told Abu Dhabi’s powerful crown prince and hundreds of imams, muftis, ministers, rabbis and swamis gathered in the Emirati capital at a time when the UAE-backed Saudi war in Yemen has driven the Arab world’s poorest country to the brink of famine.

“God is with those who seek peace,” Francis added.

Francis’ speech, delivered at the Emirates’ Founders’ Memorial, capped a historic day that began when he arrived at the presidential palace for a welcome ceremony in a tiny Kia hatchback — only to be greeted by an artillery salute and military flyover by a country at war.

Even for a nation known for excess, the Emiratis’ red-carpet welcome was remarkable, especially for a pope who prides himself on simplicity. It featured horse-mounted guards escorting the pontiff’s motorcade through the palace gardens while the flyover trailed the yellow and white smoke of the Vatican flag.

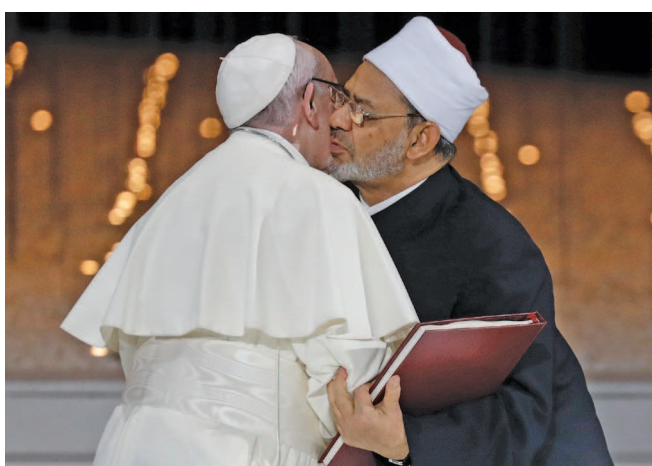


Yellow and white smoke, the colors of the Vatican flag, trail behind military aircraft during official welcome ceremony for Pope Francis in Abu Dhabi, United Arab Emirates.

Francis’ speech to the gathering of faith leaders was the highlight of his 40-hour visit to Abu Dhabi. His trip concludes Tuesday with the first papal Mass on the Arabian Peninsula, a gathering expected to draw some 135,000 faithful in a never-before-seen display of public Christian worship here.

Francis’ visit, 800 years after his peace-loving namesake St. Francis of Assisi visited an Egyptian sultan, marked the culmination of years of Holy See efforts to improve relations with the Muslim world after they hit a low during the papacy of Pope Benedict XVI. Since then, religious fanaticism and faith-inspired wars have only grown around the globe.

The Jesuit pope capitalized on his relationship with Sheikh Ahmed el-Tayeb, the grand imam of Egypt’s Al-Azhar, the revered 1,000-year-old seat of Sunni learning, to make



Pope Francis hugs Sheikh Ahmed el-Tayeb, the grand imam of Egypt’s Al-Azhar.

the historic trip. They found welcome in the Emirates, which prides itself on its tolerance in a region known for severely restricting religious freedom and is home to a remarkably vibrant Catholic community that by some estimates numbers 1 million faithful in a federation of 9 million.

At the end of the interfaith meeting, Francis and el-Tayeb signed a joint state-

ment on “human fraternity” and their hopes for world peace, and then laid the cornerstones for a new church and mosque to be built side-by-side in Abu Dhabi. The document, in Arabic and Italian, describes itself as being written in the name of “all victims of wars, persecution and injustice; ... and those tortured in any part of the world, without distinction.”

The United Arab Emirates is deeply involved in the Saudi-led war in Yemen and faces widespread international criticism for airstrikes killing civilians and the creation of the world’s worst humanitarian crisis.

As Francis began his trip, human rights groups that are banned from the UAE urged him to use his visit to press for accountability by the Emirati leadership for atrocities in the war in Yemen and its repression of dissent at home.

“Despite its assertions about tolerance, the UAE government has demonstrated no real interest in improving its human rights record,” Human Rights Watch said in a letter to Francis.

It was a reference to the UAE’s often-stated claims of tolerance — it has a minister for tolerance, is hosting the interfaith meeting Francis is attending and has declared 2019 to be its “Year of Tolerance.” That respect

for non-Muslim forms of worship, however, runs up against the political reality of media censorship, repression of political dissent and bans on proselytizing and conversion for Muslims.

Francis cited Yemen, Syria, Iraq and Libya in his speech in which he made clear that “no violence can be justified in the name of religion.”

“Human fraternity requires of us, as representatives of the world’s religions, the duty to reject every nuance of approval from the word ‘war,’” Francis said. “Let us return it to its miserable crudeness.”

“The time has come when religions should more actively exert themselves, with courage and audacity, and without pretense, to help the human family deepen the capacity for reconciliation, the vision of hope and the concrete paths of peace,” he added.

El-Tayeb, for his part, insisted to the audience that Islam is a religion of peace that values human life.

“All religions are innocent and free from terrorism and armed groups, no matter what religion or notion those groups follow, who their victims are, or what land their crimes were committed on,” he told the crowd gathered at the memorial as the sun set. “They are murderers and butchers, who are assaulting God’s messages.”

He added that after the Sept. 11, 2001, attacks in the U.S., Islam was defamed by what he called the media’s misrepresentation of its true message.

“The Western media exploited the incident to show Islam negatively as a blood-thirsty religion and to show Muslims as savage barbarians who pose a danger and threat to modern societies,” he said in a lengthy speech quoting numerous Quranic verses about the value of life.

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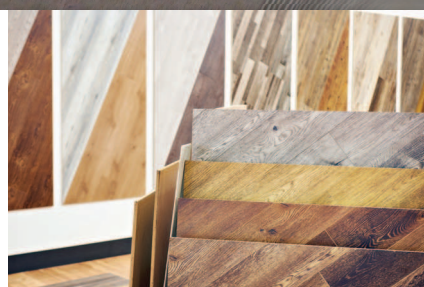
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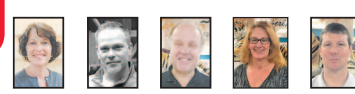
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