

After controversial video, Vatican hosts serious discussion on Islam

by [Alessandro Speciale](#) in the [November 14, 2012](#) issue

As a Vatican delegation prepared in October to leave for war-torn Syria, the Catholic Church's fraught relationship with Islam emerged as one of the main themes at a major gathering of the world's bishops in Rome.

The debate was stirred by a leading cardinal who on October 13 showed a video titled *Muslim Demographics*, which purports to document Islam's growing global influence. The video was shown during a Vatican-organized synod of bishops on new ways to evangelize in the modern world.

The accuracy of the seven-minute video's data and projections have been sharply disputed and criticized by experts since its emergence in 2009, but the showing of the film sparked renewed soul-searching among Catholic leaders on the church's stance toward the growth of Islam in the West and in Africa.

Highlighting the sensitivity of the issue, the Vatican was quick to distance itself from the video and its contents. The cardinal who showed it, Ghana's Peter Turkson, head of the Vatican office for justice and peace, has apologized.

According to Samir Khalil Samir, an Islam expert at the synod, some bishops were "highly critical" of the video and questioned its data and assertions. Others, such as German cardinal Joachim Meisner, considered it a "warning" that the church must, at least in some measure, heed.

The *Demographics* debate erupted just as the Vatican was displaying renewed concern over the fate of Christian minorities in the Middle East. On October 17 the Vatican announced the imminent departure of a high-level delegation to Syria.

The Vatican mission, which was to include New York cardinal Timothy Dolan, was to arrive in Damascus just a month after Pope Benedict's visit to neighboring Lebanon in September. It will be a sign of "solidarity" toward the Syrian people and their suffering, said Congolese cardinal Laurent Monsengwo Pasinya, a member of the

Vatican's Congregation for the Evangelization of Peoples.

The mission sought to rekindle fledgling attempts to find a political solution to Syria's civil war. —RNS

This article was edited Oct. 31, 2012.