

Pope visits Egypt and joins imams, Coptic church in calling for rejection of violence  
by [Christopher Lamb](#) in the [June 7, 2017](#) issue

Pope Francis used the political capital he has built up with the Islamic world to issue a powerful condemnation of religion-inspired violence, calling on Muslim leaders to unite against terrorist acts.

Francis made his remarks April 28 at an international peace conference held at Al-Azhar, a tenth-century mosque and university in Cairo that is a globally influential center of Sunni Muslim learning. The pontiff's speech opened a two-day trip that came less than three weeks after Palm Sunday attacks on two Coptic Christian churches in Egypt that left 45 dead and scores injured.

"Let us say once more a firm and clear 'No!' to every form of violence, vengeance, and hatred carried out in the name of God," the pope said.

The 80-year-old pope condemned "demagogic forms of populism" and the arms trade for fueling terrorism and conflict while calling for education of young people that will "turn the polluted air of hatred into the oxygen of fraternity."

Following the pope's address to the peace conference, he embraced Sheikh Ahmed el-Tayeb, the grand imam of Al-Azhar mosque, an image of Muslim-Christian fraternity that had echoes of St. Francis of Assisi's mission to Islamic leader Sultan Al-Kamil 800 years ago.

Francis's consistent refusal to link the Islamic faith per se to terrorism has made the Muslim world take notice. Egypt is the seventh Muslim-majority country Francis has visited since he became pope.

His speech at Al-Azhar was frequently interrupted with applause.

"He knows that the only effective way for his message of peace to touch the hearts of the larger global community is to speak together with leaders of other religious communities," said Gabriel Said Reynolds, a professor of Islamic studies at the University of Notre Dame, who took part in a recent Vatican-Muslim forum at Al-Azhar. At the same time, "it is not clear what kind of an impact a Catholic pope can

have in reaching the hearts of Muslims who are attracted by extremist ideology, even if the pope is speaking with the grand imam of Al-Azhar.”

Al-Azhar’s leaders are actively trying to reduce extremism in Islam. They are revered for their expertise in interpreting the Qur’an, which is key to countering the largely Sunni-inspired ideologues of the self-described Islamic State, who use scripture to justify terrorist violence. But these religious leaders also face an uphill task and a power struggle with the Egyptian government over who gets to reform what.

President Abdel Fattah el-Sisi has made it his business to keep a lid on extremist violence since taking power in a 2013 coup that overthrew the country’s first democratically elected president, Mohamed Morsi of the Muslim Brotherhood. El-Sisi’s administration has, for example, tightly controlled the content of Friday sermons delivered at the country’s 100,000 mosques in an effort to curb growing fanaticism. It has not, however, stopped ISIS from picking off disaffected members of the Brotherhood.

What all this underscores is how intertwined religious problems are with the politics of Egypt, a phenomenon that is common across the Arab world. This is also a special challenge to those in the secular West who think that if religious faith were sidelined, then the problems go away.

The challenge for religion, Francis said at Al-Azhar, is finding a balance between the public and personal realms.

“Religion tends to be relegated to the private sphere, as if it were not an essential dimension of the human person and society,” Francis said. “At the same time . . . religion risks being absorbed into the administration of temporal affairs and tempted by the allure of worldly powers that in fact exploit it.”

In this context, the pope urged Egyptian Christians to be a positive force within society; to be people of dialogue who are “sowers of hope” and able to forgive those who wrong them.

This is no easy task given the increased vulnerability of Egypt’s 9 million Christians, the vast majority of whom are Coptic Orthodox. Nevertheless, Francis said that “true faith” makes people “more merciful, more honest, and more humane” and that the only fanaticism for a religious believer should be that of charity.

In Cairo, Francis reprised a favorite phrase about an “ecumenism of blood” between Catholic martyrs and Orthodox ones while signing a joint declaration with the Coptic Orthodox pope, Tawadros II, recognizing a common baptism among their believers.

Perhaps even more significant, however, was the historic moment when Francis, Tawadros, and Patriarch Bartholomew of Constantinople, the leader of Eastern Orthodoxy, sat together during an ecumenical prayer service. It is believed to be the first time these leaders of three ancient streams of Christianity have shared a platform, and it represented a united front in defense of their flock —Religion News Service

*A version of this article, which was edited on May 22, appears in the June 7 print edition under the title “Pope visits Egypt to join imams, Coptic church in rejecting violence.”*