

When Religious Authority Becomes Actionable: Message–Carrier–Audience Alignment in the Holy See and the Najaf Marja‘iyya

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Abstract:

Religious authority is often invoked in crisis, yet its political effects are uneven. Some messages remain symbolic; others enter diplomacy, mobilization, restraint, or pressure on governing elites. This article asks how message–carrier–audience alignment enables a message from religious leadership to become an observable political output. It argues that religious authority becomes actionable when a practically directed message, a recognized institutional carrier, and an audience able to respond align under crisis conditions. The argument is examined through qualitative process tracing across four episodes: the Holy See in U.S.–Cuba rapprochement and the Ukraine war, and the Najaf Marja‘iyya in Iraq’s 2014 mobilization crisis and the 2019 Tishreen protests. The comparison suggests that carrier form shapes output: legal-diplomatic channels favor elite and humanitarian translation, while juristic-social channels work through duty, restraint, mobilization, and pressure. Religious authority, then, becomes consequential through fit, clarity, and usable capacity.

Keywords:

Religious authority; Holy See; Najaf; political translation; religious soft power

Introduction

Religious leaders often intervene when conventional politics is blocked, violently contested, or unable to command legitimacy. They condemn violence, authorize duties, invite negotiation, and define the moral limits of conduct. Yet neither the public prominence of these interventions nor their proximity to political change explains whether, or how, a religious message enters a political process. Speech, institutional access, and subsequent outcomes are too easily assembled into a single narrative of influence. The analytical problem is therefore one of political translation and causal inference: how can recognized religious authority become politically usable, and what evidence warrants attributing a bounded contribution to it? This article asks: How does message–carrier–audience alignment enable a message from religious leadership to become an observable political output? Its argument is deliberately conditional. Political translation becomes more plausible when a practically directed message moves through a recognized institutional carrier to an identifiable audience with relevant capacity to respond. Alignment denotes the relational fit among these elements: the message specifies an addressee and expected conduct; the carrier gives it recognized form and an institutionally available route; and the audience possesses capacities through which receipt may become use or response. Alignment is neither a sufficient condition nor evidence of effect by itself. It specifies a pathway whose links must be demonstrated separately. This distinction is especially important for the carrier. A sermon, letter, diplomatic venue, envoy, or maintained channel establishes carrier activity. A bounded carrier contribution additionally requires evidence indicating that such activity facilitated audience receipt, deliberation, use, or response. An independent carrier effect is a stronger proposition: that properties or operations of the carrier altered the response beyond message content and surrounding political processes. Crisis is likewise external to the alignment sequence. Depending on the claim, it may constitute background, enable access or receptivity, amplify marginal leverage, or independently generate the observed response. Co-occurrence cannot decide among these roles.

Soft-power scholarship clarifies attraction, legitimacy, persuasion, and audience perception (Nye, 2021, p. 203; Samoudi Pilehroud & Mahmoudi, 2024, p. 34), while norm research shows that claims require framing and organizational platforms (Finnemore & Sikkink, 1998, pp. 896, 899–900). Studies of the Holy See and Najaf identify, respectively, legal-diplomatic and juristic-social

repertoires (Byrnes, 2017, pp. 16, 18; Caruso, 2020, p. 1; al-Qarawee, 2017, p. 3). These literatures identify sources and institutional forms associated with influence, but do not consistently disaggregate the bounded passage from message to audience-side political trace.

The article examines that passage through theory-guided qualitative process tracing across U.S.–Cuba rapprochement, the Ukraine war, Iraq’s 2014 mobilization crisis, and the 2019 Tishreen protests. The episode is the unit of analysis. Each case is assessed through temporal ordering, claim-specific traces, audience-side evidence, and rival explanations. The article contributes by conceptualizing religious authority as a relational process of translation; comparing distinct institutional repertoires without treating institutional difference as an autonomous causal effect; and specifying evidentiary thresholds that distinguish transmission, uptake, capacity activation, output, and bounded contribution.

Literature Review: From Religious Influence to Political Translation

Religion can no longer easily be treated as a residue of international politics. Scholarship on religious actors, diplomacy, transnational networks, and soft power shows that religious authority can shape preferences, identities, agendas, and collective action. The harder question is how such authority becomes a traceable political effect. Nye locates soft power in legitimate agenda-setting, attraction, and persuasion, stressing target-audience perceptions rather than coercion or payment (Nye, 2021, p. 203). This vocabulary suits religious actors, whose influence often rests on moral authority and recognition. Yet it does not explain the episode-level passage from a specific message to an observable output: why an actor is heard is not the same as how its message becomes politically usable. Öztürk identifies continuing contestation over religious soft power’s definitions, sources, instruments, and limits (Öztürk, 2023, p. 3). Ziv shifts attention from attitudes to courses of action by affected individuals and groups, making audience response part of what must be explained (Ziv, 2024, pp. 276, 278). Response still requires a route to an audience positioned to act. The problem is political translation within a bounded sequence, not influence in general.

Norm scholarship illuminates part of that route. Finnemore and Sikkink show that normative claims do not travel through moral content alone: entrepreneurs require organizational platforms, framing names and interprets issues, and organizational networks provide access to relevant audiences (Finnemore & Sikkink, 1998, pp. 896, 899–900). The temporal focus differs, however:

not long-cycle norm socialisation, but bounded episodes—including crises and crystallised impasses—in which a religious message becomes politically usable or fails to do so.

The Holy See and Najaf exemplify different carriers. Byrnes shows that the Holy See combines sovereignty, supranational reach, institutional access, and soft power through bilateral relations, multilateral participation, official channels, and good offices (Byrnes, 2017, p. 16). This explains its operation as a legal-diplomatic rather than merely symbolic carrier, but develops less fully how a particular message moves from access to elite-institutional output. Najaf's authority, by contrast, is juristic, social, relational, and dependent on recognition by believers, clerical networks, and communities of emulation. Caruso presents Sistani as a *marja' al-taqlid* whose political interventions are tied to traditional religious responsibilities in post-2003 Iraq (Caruso, 2020, p. 1). Al-Qarawee situates Najaf within the *hawza*, clerical institutions, religious education, and contestation over Shi'i authority in Iraq and Iran (al-Qarawee, 2017, p. 2). These accounts explain why Najaf's messages travel through sermons, office statements, clerical networks, and social recognition rather than diplomatic machinery, but do not consistently trace how particular messages become connected to mobilisation, restraint, elite pressure, or public norms.

The gap thus lies between recognized authority and observable effect. Existing scholarship identifies sources of influence, institutional forms, and audience response, but does not consistently disaggregate the sequence through which a concrete message becomes politically usable. This article addresses that gap through message-carrier-audience alignment. It asks whether carrier activity counts as evidence of contribution or effect, and whether crisis strengthens religious authority or independently generates the attributed response. Both are treated as claim-specific empirical questions rather than assumptions embedded in the framework.

Theoretical-Conceptual Framework: Message-Carrier-Audience Alignment

Religious authority is treated relationally rather than as a possession that generates political effects. Message-carrier-audience alignment denotes an enabling relational configuration in which a practically directed message is conveyed through a recognized institutional route to an audience with relevant pre-existing capacity to respond. The article treats this configuration as one possible contributor to political translation; it does not claim that alignment is necessary or sufficient for political output. Alignment may make a message more politically usable by reducing institutional and interpretive friction and connecting it to capacities already available to the audience. This

formulation accords with relational accounts of power, where effects arise through social relations rather than direct command alone (Barnett & Duvall, 2005, p. 51). Recognised status is therefore insufficient, but alignment makes political actionability more plausible, not inevitable. The message is a religiously authorised speech act carrying a practical political expectation. It may call for restraint, authorise duty, invite negotiation, clarify conduct, condemn violence, or frame a crisis in morally binding terms. Austin's account of performative utterances is useful because some statements participate in performing action under accepted procedural and social conditions (Austin, 1962, pp. 6, 14). Religious messages are more politically usable when they specify the addressee, expected conduct, and limits of acceptable action.

The carrier is the institutionalised route through which a message acquires recognised form, credibility, and access. It is not merely the organisation surrounding a speaker, but the channel making an utterance socially or diplomatically legible. Bourdieu's account of symbolic power is relevant because linguistic authority depends on social recognition, not words alone (Bourdieu, 1991, p. 55). Norm scholarship likewise shows that entrepreneurs require organisational platforms to frame and advance claims (Finnemore & Sikkink, 1998, p. 896). The Holy See's legal-diplomatic carrier includes official communications, diplomatic relations, envoys, nunciatures, multilateral access, hosting, and good offices (Byrnes, 2017, p. 17). Najaf's juristic-social career comprises the marja', hawza, sermons, office statements, clerical transmission, networks of emulation, and recognition by followers (Caruso, 2020, p. 1; al-Qarawee, 2017, p. 3). The audience is not everyone exposed to a message, but actors whose conduct is addressed or practically implicated and who possessed relevant capacity at transmission. Capacity denotes independently evidenced authority, resources, organisational position, or established repertoire enabling them to undertake, authorise, redirect, restrain, or withhold the conduct at issue. Carrier access and familiarity with the message's action-language establish reach and interpretive availability, not capacity. Executive leaders and negotiating teams are plausible audiences for legal-diplomatic messages; citizens capable of volunteering, protest publics, security personnel, parliaments, and governing elites may be audiences for juristic-social messages. Clerical and social networks belong primarily to the carrier when transmitting and authenticating a message, though institutions may also become audiences when addressed. Crisis shapes this pathway without determining it. It refers to an acute or politically crystallized condition that raises the cost of inaction and may increase the salience of authoritative framing. It can heighten receptivity, resistance, or demands for moral

precision. Empirically, alignment is assessed through institutional fit, interpretive specification, and prior audience capacity established independently of output. Capacity activation is analytically subsequent: it denotes the audience's documented post-transmission use or redirection of that capacity in relation to conduct requested or ruled out by the message. Where capacity was already active, activation requires reorientation, intensification, restraint, or redeployment, not mere continuation. Interpretive specification concerns whether the message identifies the problem, addressee, expected conduct, and limits of action; Benford and Snow's diagnostic, prognostic, and motivational framing tasks clarify this process (Benford & Snow, 2000, p. 615). Capacity activation occurs when a message connects to pre-existing capacities in the carrier-audience relationship, including elite access, diplomatic coordination, mobilisation, restraint, self-policing, or pressure on governing institutions.

Crisis is analytically external to the alignment sequence and must be classified relative to the particular inference under examination. It is background when it defines the setting without performing a specified causal role; an enabling condition when it makes access, receptivity, or response more feasible; an amplifying condition when evidence indicates that it increases the marginal leverage of the message or carrier; and a rival explanation when crisis-generated threat, grievance, urgency, or strategic necessity could produce the response without religious contribution. The same crisis may occupy different positions relative to different links, but those roles must be stated separately and supported by distinct reasoning or evidence. Crisis cannot be invoked retrospectively as both an amplifier and a residual explanation merely because an intervention and an output coincide.

Expected outputs vary across institutional repertoires. The Holy See's route makes elite-institutional and humanitarian outputs more plausible; Najaf's makes mobilization, restraint, public norms, and pressure on political elites more plausible. The carrier form does not independently determine outcomes because the actor, issue, audience, and crisis context also vary. Alignment is treated as one possible contributor to political translation alongside state interests, coercion, security threats, grievances, organizational resources, and protest dynamics. Where its elements support one another, authority may become actionable; where one is weak, translation may remain symbolic, contested, redirected, partial, or inert.

Research Design and Method

This article uses theory-guided qualitative process tracing to assess traceable contribution rather than average effects. Process tracing examines diagnostic evidence within cases to evaluate descriptive and causal claims and the sequence linking possible causes to outcomes (Collier, 2011, p. 823; George & Bennett, 2005, p. 206). The unit of analysis is the episode: a time-stamped religious message transmitted through a recognized carrier to a structurally positioned audience, followed within a bounded period by a documented audience response—possibly partial or contested—or by no documented response. The four episodes were selected purposively because they contain identifiable messages, carriers, and plausible audiences in contrasting crisis settings, not merely because translation succeeded. Because none is a pure null case, the design cannot establish necessary or sufficient conditions or estimate the frequency of failure. Each episode is examined through the same analytical sequence: message and interpretive specification, carrier and institutional fit, audience identification and prior capacity, candidate capacity activation, documented audience output, and rivals. Audience identification and prior capacity must rest on pre-message evidence or evidence otherwise independent of the subsequent output. Post-transmission use or reorientation is assessed separately as candidate activation. If the same observation constitutes both activation and output, it is treated as one trace, not as independent evidence for two stages. Failure to document a required link limits or precludes a strong alignment claim; absence of a trace is not treated as proof that the process did not occur. The Holy See and Najaf are not treated as equivalent actors, and carrier effects cannot be isolated from differences in issue, audience, and context.

Temporal boundaries are episode-specific. An episode begins with documented transmission or public delivery of the focal message. It ends when the relevant response becomes observable, the anticipated channel closes, or the documentary sequence no longer supports attribution. Later developments count only when connected by continuous documentary traces. The evidentiary standard is conservative. Chronology alone is insufficient. Hypotheses, rivals, timelines, and expected evidence guide analysis. This study uses process-tracing test logic to discipline evidentiary assessment, not to assign formal scores (Collier, 2011, p. 825; Ricks & Liu, 2018, p. 842). Rivals include state interests, bargaining, third-party mediation, security threats, pre-existing networks, grievances, protest dynamics, and political strategy. Priority is given to contemporaneous first-order evidence: sermons, official religious statements, Holy See communiqués, diplomatic readouts, UN and government records, and dated legal or administrative

documents. Media and secondary scholarship support chronology, triangulation, institutional context, and rivals, but do not establish episode-level causation alone. Where sources conflict, contemporaneous first-order evidence and independently corroborated records receive greater weight.

Empirical Analysis

The Holy See and U.S.–Cuba: Legal-Diplomatic Alignment and Elite-Institutional Translation

The U.S.–Cuba episode was not a hard crisis of mass violence. It was a politically crystallized diplomatic impasse: relations had been severed for more than five decades, the conflict had accumulated symbolic weight, and routine diplomacy had become institutionally frozen. The relevant question is therefore limited. It is whether a religiously authorized diplomatic signal, carried through the Holy See's legal-diplomatic apparatus, helped reduce friction among elites already capable of action. Baisotti describes the rapprochement as a gradual process in which Pope Francis and Vatican diplomacy were visible, though never solitary, actors (Baisotti, 2017, p. 193, 199). The message fitted the carrier. In December 2014, the Holy See's Secretariat of State reported that Pope Francis had written to Raúl Castro and Barack Obama, inviting both leaders to resolve humanitarian questions, including prisoner issues, and to begin a new phase in bilateral relations. The same communiqué stated that the Holy See had received delegations from both countries and offered its good offices to facilitate dialogue on delicate matters (Holy See Secretariat of State, 2014, paras. 2–3). Papal correspondence, Vatican hosting, and good offices were not incidental forms of publicity; they belonged to the Holy See's legal-diplomatic repertoire. The audience was identifiable before the output appeared. The immediate addressees were the two executive leaders and their negotiating teams, actors able to authorize prisoner arrangements, diplomatic contact, and formal talks. Obama's 17 December statement acknowledged Pope Francis's personal appeal to him and Raúl Castro regarding Alan Gross and the Cuban agents imprisoned in the United States. In the same address, he announced that he had instructed Secretary Kerry to begin discussions with Cuba on re-establishing diplomatic relations (Obama, 2014, paras. 12). This does not prove papal causation. It shows executive recognition of the papal signal within the sequence that produced elite-institutional movement.

The strongest evidence for the Holy See's role lies in facilitation rather than origin. The White House background call makes clear that Canada hosted most meetings, immediately limiting any

inflated reading of the Vatican role (The White House, 2014, paras. 18). Yet the same call also states that Pope Francis sent letters to both presidents, encouraged resolution of prisoner cases and closer relations, and that the Vatican hosted delegations to review commitments linked to prisoner transfers and normalisation (The White House, 2014, paras. 19, 61). It further distinguished the Vatican meeting, where Vatican officials were present, from Canada's broader hosting role (The White House, 2014, paras. 68). The relevant output is not the whole U.S.–Cuba policy shift. That would overstate the claim. The traceable output is narrower: recognised papal signalling, Vatican good offices, executive uptake, and movement toward formal diplomatic talks. Later institutional follow-through is consistent with this pathway. On 1 July 2015, Obama announced that the United States and Cuba had agreed to re-establish diplomatic relations and reopen embassies, noting that after the December announcement, both presidents had directed their teams to negotiate that re-establishment (Obama, 2015, paras. 3–5). Baisotti similarly treats later papal engagement as consolidating the process rather than producing it alone (Baisotti, 2017, p. 203, 209). The letters, hosting, and provision of good offices document carrier activity within the Holy See's legal-diplomatic repertoire; they do not by themselves establish audience uptake, policy change, or an independent carrier effect.

Rival explanations remain substantial. Obama framed the shift as a reassessment of an isolation policy he judged ineffective and noted that discussions with Cuba had already been underway for months (Obama, 2014, paras. 7–12). Prior back-channel contacts, prisoner diplomacy, Canadian facilitation, domestic political calculation, Cuban decisions, and U.S. strategic reassessment all formed the causal environment (The White House, 2014, paras. 47–51). The inference is therefore facilitative, not monocausal: the Holy See's message and good offices aligned with a legal-diplomatic carrier and an executive audience, plausibly lowering institutional friction and contributing to elite-diplomatic translation already made possible by other forces.

Najaf and Iraq 2014: Juristic-Social Authorisation and Plausible Mobilisation Linkage

The Najaf 2014 episode tests a juristic-social rather than legal-diplomatic pathway, with mobilisation as the expected output. It followed the Islamic State's capture of Mosul, Iraq's security collapse, and fears for Baghdad and the Shi'i shrine cities. Mansour and Jabar report that the Islamic State seized Mosul and roughly one-third of Iraqi territory, while Rudolf treats Sistani's intervention as an important source of religious legitimisation (Mansour & Jabar, 2017, p. 3; Rudolf,

2018, pp. 1–3). This was a hard crisis: the threat was immediate and inaction costly. On 13 June 2014, Sheikh ‘Abd al-Mahdi al-Karbala’i, representative of the supreme religious authority, delivered the Friday sermon in Karbala. It framed the defence of Iraq, its people, and sacred sites as *wājib kifā’ī* and called on citizens able to bear arms to join the security forces (Office of Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani, 2014a, paras. 1, 7–8). This authorised sermon, unlike a party order or militia communiqué, articulated national defence through Najaf’s juristic language. That authority rested on social recognition. Al-Qarawee describes the *hawza* as a network of clerical schools, charities, and senior Shi‘i scholars, while Usuli believers emulate a recognised source of emulation (al-Qarawee, 2017, p. 3). The immediate audience was citizens able to bear arms; clerical and social networks transmitted and authenticated the message. Its destination was the official security forces rather than autonomous armed action. Delivery through the authorised sermon and clerical-social networks documents carrier activity and authentication. The juristic authorisation belongs to the content and performative function of the message; neither delivery nor authorisation is itself evidence of mobilisation or audience capacity activation.

On 20 June, Najaf clarified the call’s scope and destination. Sayyid Ahmad al-Safi stated that it addressed all Iraqi citizens, had no sectarian basis, and meant enrolment in official forces, not militias outside the law (Office of Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani, 2014b, paras. 1–2). He also thanked “hundreds of thousands” who had reportedly approached volunteer centres and criticised inadequate preparations for receiving them (Office of Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani, 2014b, para. 4). This supports an official claim of rapid response, not a verified count of volunteers, recruits, or deployments.

The organisational sequence was complex. Mansour and Jabar report that Maliki supported seven paramilitary groups by early 2014 and that, after the security collapse, many volunteers joined paramilitaries rather than the weakened army or police; these forces were grouped under the PMF umbrella (Mansour & Jabar, 2017, pp. 3, 6–7). They describe factions associated with Khamenei, Sistani, and Muqtada al-Sadr (Mansour & Jabar, 2017, p. 5). Rudolf reports discussions of auxiliary forces before Mosul and later dates, Cabinet Decision 301 establishing the PMU Commission to 6 June 2014, whereas Mansour and Jabar place the formal decree after the army’s collapse (Rudolf, 2018, pp. 2–3; Rudolf, 2019, pp. 20–21; Mansour & Jabar, 2017, p. 6). The safest inference is that the sermon supplied authorisation that state and paramilitary actors could channel

into an emerging structure, not that it created the PMF. Rudolf argues that Sistani's endorsement enhanced the PMU's moral legitimacy and that a call intended to reinforce the army and police was redirected into recruitment for the PMU Commission (Rudolf, 2018, pp. 3, 5; Rudolf, 2019, p. 21). Smith and Singer-Emery likewise note a large response and fragmented loyalties within the Hashd al-Sha'abi (Smith & Singer-Emery, 2019, p. 169). These accounts support legitimization and redirected recruitment more strongly than organisational creation or command.

Rival explanations remain central: Mosul's fall, fear for Baghdad and the shrine cities, security collapse, Maliki's calculations, pre-existing paramilitaries, Iranian influence, and survival incentives shaped the response. Al-Qarawee places Sistani within a field in which Najaf sought to preserve its autonomy and Iraq's state framework amid competing Iranian and Iraqi Shi'i actors (al-Qarawee, 2017, p. 5). The inference is qualified. The sermon framed national defence as a collective obligation and specified enrolment in official forces; the 20 June statement sought to foreclose sectarian and extra-legal readings. Yet the evidence consists chiefly of Najaf's report, later recruitment patterns, and retrospective accounts of legitimization. The sermon did not create the PMF umbrella, and Najaf did not command it as a whole; this does not deny later support for shrine-linked formations (Rudolf, 2018, p. 6). Najaf's narrower contribution was juristic-social authorisation for a response already driven by existential threat, plausibly lowering barriers to volunteering while political and armed actors redirected mobilisation through the emerging PMF structure.

Najaf and Iraq 2019: Salmiya, Restraint, and Rulemaking Pressure

The Najaf 2019 episode differs from 2014 in crisis type and expected output. It was not an existential security crisis but a public-order and legitimacy crisis beginning on 1 October across Baghdad and southern governorates. Protesters denounced corruption, unemployment, poor services and the post-2003 political order. UNAMI received credible reports of right-to-life violations, including deliberate killings of unarmed protesters and excessive force, and noted that no specific organisation appeared to lead the demonstrations (UNAMI, 2019, pp. 2–3). Ardovini and O'Driscoll locate the crisis in a failed social contract, as many Iraqis viewed the state as unable to provide participation, protection, and provision (Ardovini & O'Driscoll, 2023, p. 421). The carrier was again Najaf's Friday-sermon channel, but the messages concerned restraint, peaceful protest, accountability, and reform rather than armed defence. On 4 October, Sayyid Ahmad al-

Safi, reading from the Najaf office, condemned attacks on peaceful protesters, security forces, and property; demanded practical reform; and placed responsibility on Parliament (Office of Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani, 2019a, paras. 1, 3). The message addressed protesters and security forces as behavioural audiences and state authorities, especially Parliament, as institutional audiences. On 11 October, Sheikh 'Abd al-Mahdi al-Karbala'i reiterated the condemnation of violence, held the government and security apparatus responsible for bloodshed, and demanded a credible, time-bound investigation (Office of Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani, 2019b, paras. 1, 4, 8). UNAMI separately documented both statements' chronology and public content (UNAMI, 2019, p. 9). Their immediate observable contribution was normative boundary-setting, not demonstrated behavioural change: peaceful protest received authoritative recognition, repression was condemned, and violence against persons or property was excluded from the acceptable frame. Najaf did not create Tishreen's protest repertoire. Protesters generated slogans and chants centred on homeland, dignity, political exclusion, and cross-sectarian Iraqi identity. Mustafa shows that these performances produced collective, cross-sectarian narratives that challenged dominant political narratives and heightened Iraqi identity (Mustafa, 2023, pp. 401–420). The protester agency, therefore, cannot be absorbed into Najaf's authority. Its narrower role was to endorse peaceful protest and provide juristic-social backing for restraint and accountability.

The November sermons linked behavioural limits to institutional reform pressure. On 15 November, al-Safi supported the reform protests, insisted on their peaceful character, condemned attacks on protesters, security forces, institutions, and private property, and tied governmental legitimacy to the people, a fair secret ballot, an equitable electoral law, and a credible commission (Office of Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani, 2019c, points 1–2). On 22 November, Najaf reiterated the protests' legitimacy and peacefulness and pressed for rapid completion of the electoral and electoral-commission laws (Office of Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani, 2019d, para. 1). On 29 November, after lethal violence in Nasiriyah and Najaf, it urged peaceful protesters to distinguish themselves from violent actors, called on Parliament to reconsider its options regarding the government, and demanded accelerated electoral legislation (Office of Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani, 2019e, paras. 2–3). On 20 December, it linked an exit from the crisis to early elections after a fair electoral law, an independent commission, and effective monitoring (Office of Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani, 2019f, paras. 2–3). The outputs were mixed and bounded. Discursively, Najaf legitimised peaceful protest, condemned repression, and articulated limits against killing,

intimidation, sabotage, and attacks on property. Institutionally, its sermons added moral pressure to demands already generated by the streets. Abdul-Mahdi announced his intended resignation on 29 November after the sermon called on Parliament to reconsider its governmental options. Contemporary reporting portrayed the intervention as narrowing his room for manoeuvre, but also emphasised sustained protest, lethal repression, casualties, and escalating crisis; the evidence supports contributory pressure, not singular causation (The Guardian, 2019). Electoral reform requires the same caution. Parliament approved a new electoral law on 24 December after repeated Najaf calls for fair rules, a credible commission, and early elections. Al-Jaffal treats protest pressure as the principal impetus and Sistani's support as helping accelerate adoption, while showing that ratification took more than eleven months and political parties diluted much of the law's reform potential (al-Jaffal, 2021, paras. 1–4). The sequence is consistent with pressure amplification but does not isolate Najaf's independent causal weight.

The inference is qualified normative alignment. Najaf did not create Tishreen, command the squares, or originate its peaceful, cross-sectarian repertoire. The protests were decentralised, predominantly youth-led, and rooted in prior grievances (UNAMI, 2019, p. 3). Through its juristic-social carrier, Najaf endorsed peaceful protest, condemned repression and sabotage, specified behavioural limits, and directed pressure toward accountability and electoral reform. The strongest evidence concerns legitimation, boundary-setting, and elite-directed pressure; evidence of direct behavioural compliance or independent causation of resignation and electoral legislation remains limited.

The Holy See and Ukraine: Legal-Diplomatic Access, Interpretive Friction, and Partial Humanitarian Translation

The Ukraine episode is a limiting case for message-carrier-audience alignment. Unlike U.S.–Cuba, it involved full-scale war, invasion, occupation, civilian suffering, prisoners, displacement, and the alleged deportation or forcible transfer of Ukrainian children to Russia. The Holy See's legal-diplomatic carrier remained active, but access did not translate into settlement-level influence; relevant audiences assessed the moral and interpretive clarity of Vatican messaging differently. On 5 June 2023, the Holy See announced Cardinal Matteo Maria Zuppi's visit to Kyiv as Pope Francis's envoy to listen to Ukrainian authorities about possible ways to achieve a just peace and support “gestures of humanity” that might ease tensions (Holy See Press Office, 2023a,

para. 1). In July, it announced his Washington visit within the same mission, emphasising humanitarian initiatives for the most afflicted and fragile, especially children (Holy See Press Office, 2023b, para. 1). Envoy diplomacy, official communication, elite access, and humanitarian agenda-setting were carrier-native forms. They established presence and channels, not evidence of settlement-level translation.

Audience reception was fractured by interest and moral expectation. Ukrainian authorities expected clearer identification of aggression, sovereignty, and victimhood; Russia had little incentive to accept language constraining its war aims; and Western criticism often judged Vatican neutrality against the fact of invasion. Language intended to preserve channels could therefore appear evasive to audiences requiring clearer moral identification. McLarren identifies a pattern of silence around Russia's aggression and breach of international law (McLarren, 2024, p. 97). She shows that Holy See interventions at the United Nations did not identify Russia as the aggressor and that Pope Francis named war and atrocities without directly identifying the aggressor (McLarren, 2024, pp. 98–99). These observations do not establish that ambiguity caused weak settlement outcomes, but they indicate interpretive friction among key audiences. The controversy over Pope Francis's "white flag" remarks made that friction visible. Ukraine's foreign ministry summoned the papal nuncio and expressed disappointment; Cardinal Pietro Parolin then clarified that the first condition for negotiations was an end to aggression and that Russia was the aggressor (Reuters, 2024a, paras. 1–2, 7). The sequence documents contested reception and subsequent clarification, while the diplomatic channel remained open.

The humanitarian record supports uptake and bounded channel use, not demonstrated effect. Parolin's statement concerning direct contacts and an ad hoc mechanism records the Holy See's account of carrier activity; without independent or audience-side corroboration, it does not establish the channel's effect on particular humanitarian cases. By contrast, Yermak's request for Vatican assistance with prisoners of war is audience-side evidence that a Ukrainian official regarded the channel as usable. It therefore supports uptake and narrow channel use. It does not demonstrate a post-transmission change in Ukrainian capacity, independently verify the return of prisoners or children, or establish that the Holy See produced those outcomes. (Holy See Press Office, 2024, paras. 1–8). In April 2024, Reuters separately reported that Andriy Yermak thanked Zuppi for efforts to return Ukrainian children taken to Russia and requested assistance with

prisoners of war (Reuters, 2024b, para. 4). These traces support a narrow inference: Ukrainian authorities treated the Vatican channel as useful on humanitarian matters. They do not show that the Holy See alone secured returns. The output was therefore differentiated. The Holy See maintained access through envoy missions, elite meetings, communiqués, and peace-related forums and pursued humanitarian channels concerning children and prisoners. At the settlement level, however, there is no strong trace that papal signalling produced a ceasefire, negotiation framework, or major shift in belligerent positions. Russian strategic aims, Ukrainian resistance, military developments, Western arms and sanctions, NATO and EU politics, and domestic legitimacy pressures remained dominant. Ukraine, therefore, marks the limit of alignment: carrier access and bounded humanitarian translation coexisted with weak political-settlement translation. Contested moral clarity may have reduced receptivity, but military-strategic constraints remained decisive; religious authority was only partially actionable.

Comparative Analysis: How Alignment Travels, Narrows, or Stalls

The comparison does not establish necessary or sufficient conditions. With four selected episodes and no pure null case, it specifies range conditions. The strongest traces of actionability appear where a practically directed message travels through a recognised carrier to an identifiable audience able to respond. Where reception is contested or capacity constrained, translation narrows, shifts register, or stalls. Institutional fit varies little because each actor used forms native to its repertoire; it is therefore an enabling condition, not a demonstrated threshold or explanation of variation. The Holy See relied on correspondence, hosting, good offices, envoys, communiqués, and humanitarian channels; Najaf on Friday sermons, office statements, clerical-social recognition, and juristic languages of duty or restraint. Because actor, carrier, issue, audience, and context covary, the independent effect of carrier type cannot be isolated. Mojtabedi and Van Wijk show Islamic jurisprudence entering the Iraqi state and armed practice rather than acting independently (2021, pp. 407–408, 413). Variation is clearest in interpretive specification and audience capacity. In U.S.–Cuba, papal signalling connected humanitarian and prisoner questions to an opening usable by executive actors. In Iraq 2014, *wājib kifāʾī* authorised defence, while the 20 June clarification sought to narrow sectarian and extra-legal readings; recruitment nevertheless passed through a fragmented security field. In Iraq 2019, Najaf specified legitimate conduct and directed reform claims toward governing institutions without commanding the streets. In Ukraine, Vatican

access remained usable for children and prisoners, but settlement translation was weak amid contested reception and dominant military-strategic constraints. Smytsnyuk similarly treats Holy See neutrality as both a mediation opening and a moral dilemma (2025, p. 156). Driessen cautions that religious mediation is not a “magic solution” and can only contribute alongside political, economic, and institutional drivers (Driessen, 2025, p. 6).

The episodes, therefore, show different configurations, not a single scale of religious influence: facilitative elite-diplomatic translation in U.S.–Cuba; qualified legitimization and mobilisation in Iraq 2014; normative boundary-setting and pressure amplification in Iraq 2019; and partial humanitarian translation alongside weak settlement translation in Ukraine. Context shaped receptivity and feasible output, but not uniformly. Security collapse made duty urgent in 2014; legitimacy crisis heightened restraint and reform in 2019; diplomatic impasse increased the potential value of a trusted channel in Cuba; and full-scale war sharpened disputes over moral identification in Ukraine. The comparison supports a contributory, institutionally specific pathway, not carrier-type causation.

Table 1: Episodes Alignment pattern

Episode	Alignment pattern	Main limit
Holy See / U.S.–Cuba	Elite-diplomatic alignment through papal letters, good offices, and executive uptake	Facilitative role only; strategic reassessment, prisoner diplomacy, Canada, and Cuban decisions remained central.
Najaf / Iraq 2014	Qualified mobilisation through wājib kifā’ī and juristic-social recognition	Armed response was redirected through state collapse, armed networks, and PMF fragmentation.
Najaf / Iraq 2019	Normative alignment through salmiya, restraint, accountability, and electoral reform pressure	Tishreen remained autonomous; Najaf amplified rather than authored the movement.

Holy See / Ukraine	Partial humanitarian translation through the envoy diplomacy and channels on children and prisoners	Moral clarity was contested by key audiences; settlement translation remained weak.
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Conclusion

The comparison does not support a uniform claim of religious influence. It reveals distinct evidentiary thresholds across the translation sequence. U.S.–Cuba provides the strongest basis for a bounded facilitative contribution, because an audience-side record connects the Vatican venue to the review and finalisation of commitments concerning prisoner arrangements. Iraq documents juristic authorisation and clarification, but only a plausible, independently unverified mobilisation linkage. Najaf's intervention during Tishreen is consistent with a limited contribution to institutional pressure, without demonstrated behavioural compliance. Ukraine shows contested settlement reception and bounded uptake and attempted use of a humanitarian channel, but neither attributable humanitarian effect nor settlement translation.

This variation supplies the article's main theoretical result: carrier activity, carrier contribution, and independent carrier effect are analytically distinct. Sermons, letters, envoys, access, and maintained channels document transmission, authentication, or availability; they cannot substitute for audience-side evidence of use, response, or downstream effect. The Holy See's legal-diplomatic repertoire and Najaf's juristic-social repertoire consequently identify institutionally feasible forms of translation, not autonomous causal effects. Crisis likewise has no uniform explanatory role. Depending on the claim, it may constitute background, enable a receptive moment or channel, or operate as a rival cause of the observed response. None of the episodes independently demonstrates crisis amplification. Separating these roles prevents urgency from being mistaken for religious leverage.

Message–carrier–audience alignment therefore contributes an evidential discipline rather than a sufficient causal model: it identifies where evidence supports translation, becomes contested, or ceases to sustain the inference. The study remains limited by heterogeneous cases, unequal audience-side evidence, and simultaneous strategic processes. Closer within-repertoire comparisons, including unsuccessful interventions, could test when transmission becomes politically usable. The defensible conclusion is bounded: religious authority may enter political processes through institutional routes, but its significance must be established linkage by linkage and confined to what the evidence sustains.

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