NATIONAL CATHOLIC REPORTER
Published on *National Catholic Reporter* (http://ncronline.org)

What's at stake in Francis/Netanyahu summit

John L. Allen Jr. | Dec. 1, 2013 NCR Today

Tomorrow morning Pope Francis returns to high stakes geo-diplomacy, following up a summit a week ago with Russian President Vladimir Putin with a tête-à-tête with Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu.

The encounter between the pontiff and the Israeli leader, scheduled for 10:30am Rome time in the Vatican?s Apostolic Palace, looms as important for at least four reasons.

First, a trip to Israel could well be Francis? first foreign outing in 2014. Media reports recently pointed to May 25-26 as possible dates for a papal visit, citing a senior Israeli source. Presumably that stop would be part of a larger swing through the Holy Land, also including a stop in the Palestinian Territories and potentially also in Jordan.

When popes visit the region, they typically insist on travelling to both Israel and the Palestinian Territories as a way of underscoring the Vatican?s diplomatic neutrality in the Middle Eastern conflict.

The meeting with Netanyahu could provide some confirmation of the trip, either from the pope himself or from Vatican or Israeli sources. If it happens, it would easily become the new pope?s most delicate overseas trip so far.

Second, Francis and Netanyahu both are intensely concerned about the ongoing civil war in Syria, and they don?t necessarily size things up the same way.

Concerned about what Israel sees as an emerging alliance between the regime of Syrian President Bashar al-Assad and Iran, Netanyahu has forcefully supported calls in the West for the use of force to hem in Assad?s forces.

Francis, equally concerned about the possibilities for wider regional conflict and for negative impact on Syria?s Christian minority, has opposed outside military intervention in Syria. On Sept. 7, he called Catholics around the world to a day of prayer and fasting for peace in Syria, widely seen as a way of expressing opposition to a call for strikes that was then gathering steam in Washington and other Western capitals.

No doubt Syria will come up, it will be interesting to see if the two leaders can reach a meeting of the minds.

Third, every encounter between a pope and an Israeli leader inevitably also has consequences for the wider relationship between Catholicism and Judaism. Francis has won high marks among Jewish leaders for his track record in Argentina and for several statements he?s made since becoming pope, including his insistence that ?a Christian cannot be an anti-Semite.?

Yet some Jewish leaders worry that Francis, the first pope from the developing world, may not be quite so politically friendly to Israel. In that context, Francis may use the occasion to send a signal about his understanding of the security challenges Israel faces.

Fourth, the visit is also a chance for Netanyahu to recover from a minor diplomatic embarrassment in mid-October, when Palestinian leader Mahmoud Abbas visited Francis at the Vatican.

Cameras on that occasion captured Francis offering Abbas a pen as a gift, with Abbas responding that he hoped to use it to sign a peace treaty with Israel. Afterwards a Netanyahu spokesperson said the Israeli leader would meet with the pope in just a few days, but that meeting never materialized.

This will be the third pope Netanyahu has met, after a 1997 session with John Paul II in the Vatican and a 2009 meeting with Benedict XVI during the pontiff?s visit to the Holy Land.

*(Follow John Allen on Twitter:**@JohnLAllenJr**)*

Source URL (retrieved on *11/28/2015 - 00:36*): http://ncronline.org/blogs/ncr-today/whats-stake-francisnetanyahu-summit?splash=