

Pope Francis meets with Israel's Benjamin Netanyahu

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VATICAN CITY (RNS) Can the so-called “Francis effect” that has captivated the imagination of the Catholic Church now extend to global politics?

Pope Francis met Monday (Dec. 2) with Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, a week after a papal summit with Russian President Vladimir Putin. Starting with vocal statements about Syria, observers say Francis is beginning to raise the political profile of the Vatican to levels not seen since the height of John Paul II's papacy.

Netanyahu and Francis spoke in a 25-minute closed-door meeting in which the two men reportedly discussed the threat of a nuclear Iran — a hot-button topic that has inspired fiery rhetoric from Netanyahu in recent days — as well as the plight of Christians in the Middle East, the ongoing Syrian civil war, and a possible papal trip to the Holy Land next year.

The unannounced trip, which is reportedly scheduled for May, is itself an important step in warming relations between Israel and the Vatican, which established diplomatic relations only 20 years ago. Francis will be only the fourth pope to travel to Israel, following Paul VI in 1964, John Paul II in 2000, and Benedict XVI in 2009.

But many observers said the rising profile of the Vatican as a political player could be the biggest take-away from Monday's summit.

“The Vatican has traditionally played an important behind-the-scenes role in international politics, but that hasn't been the case in recent years,” said the Rev. Alistair Sear, a retired church historian.

James Walston, a frequent commentator from the American University in Rome, agreed.

“John Paul II was the first to take a high-profile political role, during the Cold War and afterwards, but during John Paul’s declining years, and throughout Benedict XVI’s papacy, the Vatican was more quiet,” Walston said.

That is starting to change under Francis, who has not been shy about speaking out on difficult topics. In September, Francis strongly called for a nonmilitary solution in Syria, and in his meetings with both Putin and Netanyahu, he reportedly pushed that point of view.

“In the space of just a few months (as pope), Francis has become very popular with the faithful and even with non-Christians,” Sear said. “Now the question is whether that can be leveraged into an increased influence on global affairs.”