

Pope, Iraqi leader discuss protecting Christians, national sovereignty

VATICAN CITY (CNS) – Pope Francis met with Iraq’s president for private talks underlining the need for promoting stability, reconstruction, national sovereignty and dialogue in the country as well as guaranteeing security for Christians.

The closed-door meeting between the pope and President Barham Salih at the Vatican Jan. 25 lasted about 30 minutes, pool reports said.

“During the cordial discussions, the good bilateral relations” between the two countries were discussed as well as the challenges Iraq currently faces, according to a Vatican statement.

The topics included “the importance of promoting stability and the reconstruction process, encouraging the path of dialogue and the search for suitable solutions in favor of citizens and with respect for national sovereignty,” the Vatican said.

In fact, their meeting came the same month tensions escalated between Iraq, Iran and the United States.

Iran launched more than a dozen ballistic missiles at two Iraqi bases housing U.S. troops Jan. 8 in retaliation for the U.S. targeted killing of Iran’s top militia commander, Maj. Gen. Qassem Soleimani, in Baghdad Jan. 3. Seeing the U.S. strike as a violation of its sovereignty, Iraq’s government requested the U.S. begin talks to pull its forces out its country. The strikes have also likely complicated the pope’s plans to visit Iraq this year.

According to the Vatican, the pope and the Iraqi president also discussed “the importance of preserving the historical presence of Christians in the country, of which they are an integral part, and the significant contribution they bring to the reconstruction of the social fabric, highlighting the need to guarantee their security and a place in the future of Iraq.”

“Finally, the parties discussed the various conflicts and grave humanitarian crises that afflict the region, underlining the importance of the efforts made with the support of the international community to re-establish trust and peaceful coexistence,” the Vatican statement said.

During an exchange of gifts after the private talks, Pope Francis made what some observers took as a reference to identity cards only being issued in Iraq to individuals who self-identify as being Muslim, Yazidi, Sabeen-Mandean or Christian.

The pope was heard telling President Salih that he would like to have an identity card that says, “Bergoglio, son of ... son of ... son of ... until it reaches Abraham,” who was born in what today is Iraq and is recognized by Muslims, Jews, Christians and Baha’i.

The president, meanwhile, gave the pope what the president called “a symbol of peace”: a silver, reduced-sized replica of the Code of Hammurabi, one of the first forms of law in the world, dating from about 1750 BC.

The pope gave the president a medallion depicting growth in the desert and a reference to the prophet Isaiah, that the desert would one day become a garden.

The pope also gave him copies of his major writings and a copy of the document on human fraternity that he had signed with Ahmad el-Tayeb, the grand imam of al-Azhar and a leading religious authority for many Sunni Muslims.

President Salih later held private meetings with Cardinal Pietro Parolin, Vatican secretary of state, and Archbishop Paul Gallagher, secretary for relations with states.