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Israel approves law to ease conversion to Judaism

Daily News (03.11.2014) - The Israeli cabinet approved a new law Sunday that would enable easier conversions to Judaism, a move advocates hope will encourage hundreds of thousands of "religionless" Israelis to become Jewish.

The new law, a ministerial compromise following a bill initiated by Elazar Stern of Justice Minister Tzipi Livni's HaTnuah movement, stipulates that the chief rabbi of each Israeli city would be able to form and head a conversion court, pending conditions to be set by the chief rabbinate.

This would potentially greatly increase the number of conversion courts from the four current state-recognised Orthodox bodies.

Israel has some 364,000 citizens defined as "religionless," the bulk of whom immigrated from the former Soviet Union.

They are not considered Jewish under the strict definition of Jewish law, despite most having lineage of the religion, but they are still considered Israeli by the state.

Stern pledged to act swiftly to implement the decision and form new courts for conversion candidates, "especially those who had already given up on conversion".

Livni called the new law "great news for hundreds of thousands of citizens who live with us, whom we encouraged to immigrate as part of the Law of Return but until now were second-rate citizens".

Critics say Israel's conversion courts, overseen by the ultra-Orthodox chief rabbinate, are overly stringent and discourage potential converts.

The chief rabbinate, however, has not accepted the new law, and will discuss its course of action later, a spokesman said.

Natan Sharansky, chairman of Israel's Jewish Agency which links Jewish communities around the world with Israel and each other, said the new law was "crucial to the successful absorption and integration of many immigrant Israelis".

"There is no doubt that this is a welcome development to all who wish to draw in those who are distant and embrace those who have come near," he said in a statement.

Rabbi Seth Farber, whose ITIM organisation provides advice and help to people challenged by Israel's religious bureaucracy, hailed the law as "the first major reform in religion and state that has the potential to fundamentally change the status quo in Israel".

Meet the Israeli Christians who actually want to be drafted

By Noga Tarnopolsky

Global Post (25.04.2014) - For the first time in its history, Israel's army is getting ready to send voluntary military enlistment notices to Christian Arab citizens when they turn eighteen.

The unlikely impetus behind the move is none other than the Arab Spring, the popular rebellion revolutionizing the Arab world and in the process recalibrating the relationship between Christian citizens and the State of Israel. Shocked by a new climate featuring violence against Christians in Egypt and Libya, among other countries, and displacement in Syria, some of Israel's Christian Arabs are pushing for greater participation in their home state.

Father Gabriel Naddaf, a compelling figure in a full black beard, royal blue robes and a kalimavkion — the traditional tubular hat worn by Greek Orthodox priests that renders his already imposing height Shaquillesque — is chairman of a group called the Israeli Christians Recruitment Forum (ICRF) that has been lobbying the government for the draft of Christian youth for the past two years.

The name alone — "Israeli Christians Recruitment Forum," rather than "Arab Christians Recruitment Forum" — is a strong statement in this region. Naddaf has lost patience, he says, "with the Arab world telling us what we can do and what we should feel."

"In light of the persecution of Christians in Arab countries just because they are Christians," Naddaf said in a meeting with journalists this week following the army's announcement, "our youth feels they must make a sacrifice for the country that is protecting them." He believes that these notices, which still aren't equivalent to the obligatory draft others face, will "open the door ... to full participation in society for Christians." But apart from an explicit welcome, the notices will include details on a possible preliminary meeting at the individual's nearest IDF enlistment office, and reduce the amount of energy Christian youths need to expend volunteering for a service other citizens are brought into automatically.

Since the establishment of Israel in 1948, the country made certain exceptions to its universal, compulsory military service policy.

Although the Druze and the Circassians are subject to the same draft as the Jews, Druze and Circassian women are exempt, unlike Jewish women.

Ultra-Orthodox Jews have been exempted entirely, due to the need to revive their culture after it was almost eliminated by the Holocaust.

Arab citizens of Israel have also been released from duty, the state accepting the argument that an Arab could not be asked to bear arms against an Arab brother. Christian Arabs, the majority Christian group in Israel, are included under this exemption along with their Muslim brethren.

All exempt demographics may still volunteer, but must seek out the necessary information themselves. The Bedouin, who are Muslims, have a long tradition of volunteering for service, though they are not required to join.

Until 2012, according to ICRF, only about 35 Christians a year volunteered for military service, alongside some 400 Muslims.

Now, some are demanding what Naddaf calls "an equal part in the life of the state." According to an Israeli army spokesman, about 100 Christians have enlisted in each of the past two years. The ICRF says that 427 Christian women are currently in the national service, the common alternative to army service. That means that 30 percent of about 1,800 eligible Christian youths are engaged in some type of service "when the entire thing has depended on their own initiative," says ICRF spokesman reserve Captain Shadi Khaloul, speaking at the meeting with Naddaf.

"Imagine, if we do a good job educating them, what the potential is."

Those protesting the move, like Basel Ghattas, a secular Christian Arab parliamentarian representing the National Democratic Assembly, see it as an attempt to divide Israel's Arab population, or even a first step in the conscription of all Arabs.

"In a year they will see that the Christians are enlisting and apply compulsory service on all of us," he said during an Army Radio interview on Tuesday, adding, "Of course we're opposed."

He called on Christian youths to return the enlistment notices "by mail or burn them."

"I didn't hear [Arab leaders] screaming when Bedouin Arabs enlisted, when the Druze were drafted," said Khaloul, who himself served from 1993-1997 as one of Israel's first Christian paratroop commanders. "Everyone else integrates into society, so why do they expect us to remain silent? What problem do they have with Christians?"

Naddaf, 40, has paid a significant price for his stance. Last December, one of his sons was attacked. Naddaf himself is now shadowed by bodyguards. Following the press event on Tuesday, some new Facebook posts and a Youtube video once again threatened his life.

For Khaloul, the very premise whereby Christians are considered part of the Arab nation, and thus are presumed to owe allegiance to fellow Arabs rather than to the state of Israel, is flawed.

"The indigenous Christians here spoke Aramaic," he says. "The Arabs came from the Arabian peninsula and conquered the entire Middle East, and we are now asking the State of Israel to help us retrieve our stolen identity, and allow us to make our own decisions."

Samer Jozen, a native of the Galilean village of Meilia, also a former paratroop soldier, says, "We love this country. We are citizens just like everyone else. My cousin was an advisor to a minister." His daughter is joining the air force in two months.

"My wife is Romanian," he adds. "My daughter is a dual national. Do you think we could live anywhere in the Arab world? Do you think we could live in Lebanon? Syria? I can't live in any Arab country. This is my place. I am proud to defend it."

By his estimate, "80 percent of the current movement has been influenced by the Arab Spring." In short, seeing the plight of Christians in Arab countries during the Arab Spring is sobering, not to say terrifying, for many local Christians.

"Dalia," 35, a Christian officer from the center of Israel who refused to be identified due to the nature of her current job, said the new recruitment policies "will make it easier on the kids who want to join but are afraid. Now they can say 'I got a notice and I just followed through.'"

"Of course this has angered some people," she allows, "but we live in a democracy, and everyone has the right to decide what to do."

The movement for Christian recruitment and its opposition are based in the Galilee, where the bulk of Israel's Christians reside, almost all in mixed communities. Shlomo Buchbut is the mayor of Ma'a lot Tarshiha, one such city, that likes to call itself "the Switzerland of the Galilee." It is a quiet town, and he has been mayor for 37 years.

He says that many of the Christian leaders he speaks with complain that starting a new policy now is just stirring trouble. But "if you had drafted us from the beginning, we would have gone, like everybody else."

"Between us," the mayor said in a conversation with GlobalPost, "I think that every citizen should be drafted, period. Muslims, Christians, Jews — everyone. If my kids serve, everybody's kids serve."

He says that some Arab leaders ask him, "'What do you want, for us to fight against our own brothers?'"

"I say, look at Lebanon and Syria," Buchbut says. "What do you think they are doing there? You live in a country and you have to defend it."

Politics divides Nazareth's Muslims and Christians

Though Nazareth is known for its Christian community, Israel's biggest Arab city is home to a Muslim majority. Tensions between the two religions have been on the rise since a mayoral election turned ugly.

By Marijke Peters

DW (01.04.2014) /

<http://www.dw.de/politics-divides-nazareths-muslims-and-christians/a-17527424> - Until last year, Ramez Jaraisi and Ali Salam were close friends. The incumbent Christian mayor and his Muslim deputy ran the city together in a successful partnership; their different religions were largely insignificant.

But when the two men stood against each other in last October's election, everything changed. After a tight race, with just a handful of votes separating them, allegations surfaced of electoral fraud. Israel's attorney general ordered a new election earlier this month, which Ali Salam won.

In the city's souk, or covered market, shopkeepers say the rumors and dirty campaigns around the election affected business. "Trade was a bit slow and the atmosphere was tense," says Mohammed, who runs a women's clothing store.

Down the road, another shopkeeper says most people don't care about religion, but that the election stirred up trouble: "I believe religion is politics - in Nazareth the politicians try to use it this way, they want to get into the Knesset or high places by making conflict between Christians, Muslims and even Jews. They shouldn't do it - it's not allowed - but how can they win their war?"

It's perhaps unsurprising that the contest was fought along sectarian lines: when the state of Israel was created in 1948, Nazareth was a small Christian town. The influx of Muslim refugees from surrounding villages changed its demographic makeup, and the high birth rate in the Muslim community means they now make up more than 70 percent of residents.

Adib Hazzan, a member of Nazareth's Greek Orthodox church leadership, says there have always been issues, but they mostly stay under the surface: "When I was young we didn't talk about Muslims or Christians. Now the city has grown larger. There are certain suburbs that are all Muslim. Young people learn in their schools there, they don't meet Christians on every day basis."

"When they want to come to this part of the city they say: we are going to Nazareth, as if they live in a different place. These are conditions that don't create this spirit of fraternity."

Divide and rule?

A recent law passed by the Israeli government that designates Israeli Christians as no longer considered "Arab" is adding further fuel to the fire. The ruling was followed by a proposal to make conscription for Christians obligatory - until now, just like Muslims in Israel, the country's Christians have been exempt from the army service that all Jewish 18-year-olds must do.

Mohamed Zeidan, chairman of the Follow-up Committee for Arabs in Israel, is fighting the bill. He argues it would drive a wedge between Christians and Muslims, when they should be sticking together.

Zeidan worries Christian conscription will undermine support for the Palestinians in the West Bank and accuses the Israeli government of trying to divide and rule: "It's trying to use what is happening in the surrounding area, in Syria and Egypt and Iraq, to say there is a war against Christians and make them scared. They say, watch out what the Muslims are doing to you. You should join the army to protect yourselves, but we're telling them that we will protect them."

As the number of Christians enlisting voluntarily increases, Nazareth's Arab leaders are starting to join forces to try and promote unity with Muslims. A multi-faith conference will be held in April with lectures for young people. Hazzan is adamant the government won't succeed in using religion for political gain: "It is the duty of the people whom we call leaders to deal with this issue. Not to brush it aside, to face it. To deal with it courageously," he says.

At the end of the day this seems to be a battle for identity, and both men are hoping the Arab badge will trump those of the individual faiths, Zeidan says: "Everyone has their own religion. One goes to the church, another to the mosque. But the only thing that's important for uniting us is our cause. We are one people. We live together. We have a shared culture."

Ministry touts rise in rates of conversion to Judaism

The Jerusalem Post (14.01.2014) - Last year, 33 percent more non-Jewish Israelis converted through the state conversion authority than in 2012, the Religious Services Ministry stated on Tuesday.

There was also an increase in 2013 in the number of converts among immigrants from the former Soviet Union over the 2012 figures, although 2012 represented a nadir in conversions from this demographic over the past six years.

The issue of conversion in that community remains a cause for concern among groups worried about intermarriage between Jews and non-Jews in Israel.

There are approximately 330,000 Israeli citizens of Jewish descent who are not Jewish according to Jewish law, of which some 80,000 are children.

According to the ministry, 5,671 people successfully converted in 2013, compared to 4,312 in 2012, although much of the increase was from the Ethiopian community and not the target community from the former Soviet Union.

Part of the absorption process for Ethiopian immigrants is a streamlined conversion process, which is most complete.

According to the ministry, of those who converted in 2013, there were 2,836 converts from "all other countries" (that is, excluding Ethiopia), compared to 2,043 in 2012, representing a 48% increase.

Of those, 828 converted through the IDF rabbinical conversion court, rather than the civil rabbinical courts. The demographic breakdown for that group is unavailable, however.

Alongside all of these converts were another 2,835 from the Ethiopian community, compared to 2,269 in 2012, constituting a 25% increase.

But the increase in converts from other countries received a significant boost from the arrival and conversion of 300 members of the Bnei Menashe community from North East India.

According to some, the Bnei Menashe are descended from one of the ancient 10 lost tribes of Israel, and they received immigration visas to Israel under the right of return. Like the Ethiopian immigrants, they undergo a streamlined conversion process.

In addition, 2012 saw a 23% decline in conversion among Israelis from the former Soviet Union compared to the 2011 figures.

Furthermore, of the converts from "all other countries" in 2013, 271 were non-Israeli citizens – that is, not immigrants from the former Soviet Union.

So the total number of people who converted from "all other countries" through the civil rabbinical courts, excluding non-Israeli citizens and the Bnei Menashe, was approximately 1,400 to 1,500 people – almost the same number as in 2012.

The head of the conversion authority, Mulli Jesselson, welcomed the increase in conversions and said it showed that the authority was "willing to serve those requesting to convert warmly and with the appropriate sensitivity."

Jesselson added that "the increase of 33 percent in the number of [conversion] certificates issued by the civil rabbinical courts for conversion is a result of massive and intensive field work."

But Orthodox Rabbi Seth Farber, director of the ITIM religious-services advisory and lobbying group, was more circumspect about the progress made.

"While we are pleased that the numbers have gone up a little, we believe strongly that there is considerable work to be done to make conversion accessible to the numbers of immigrants who we believe are interested in converting," said Farber.

He also claimed that in 2013, according to ITIM figures, there were approximately the same number of non-Jewish immigrants of Jewish descent who immigrated to Israel as there were non-Jewish Israelis who converted to Judaism.

"We're not making the kind of progress that we need in order to maintain the Jewish character of State of Israel," he said. "Unless there is a sea change in the attitude of all relevant parties involved in conversion, we are not going to achieve this goal."
