

Arab Christians Lobby to Join the Israel Defense Forces

Over the summer, the Israeli media highlighted a phenomenon that is both intriguing and encouraging: a movement among Israel's Christian Arabs advocating that their community be drafted, along with the country's Jewish and Druze citizens, into the Israel Defense Forces (IDF).

Historically, Israel's Arab citizens have been exempted from mandatory conscription. There have been exceptions—many Bedouin, for example, have served in the IDF with distinction—but those who actually volunteer are a tiny minority. At the same time, many Arabs have complained, not without justification, that the exemption marginalizes them from fully participating in Israeli life.

That now appears to be changing, against the background of a broader reassessment of the conscription policy. Earlier this year, a Knesset committee headed by Science and Technology Minister Jacob Perry approved measures that would draft the majority of haredi men—another minority that has largely avoided military service—with criminal sanctions waiting in the wings in the case that draft quotas are not met.

But the indications are that draft dodging won't be too much of a problem when it comes to Christian Arabs. Their community, at 130,000 strong, makes up just less than 10 percent of the total Arab population in **Israel**. In the weeks that followed the formation of a new political party, B'nei Brit HaHadasha ("Sons of the New Testament"), by a merchant seaman, Bishara Shilyan, whose nephew serves as a major in the Israeli Army, around 90 Arab Christians enlisted in the IDF. It seems like a tiny number, but it's a threefold increase compared to 2010. And earlier this month, around 250 Arab Christian youths attended a recruitment event organized by the

IDF with the assistance of Ft. Gabriel Nadaf, an Orthodox priest from Nazareth and a vocal supporter of Christian recruitment into the armed forces.

This new mood among **Christian Arabs** has worried the Communists and Arab nationalists who have traditionally played a central role in the political leadership of Israel's Arab citizens. You can imagine them tearing their hair out when they hear statements like this one, from Fr. Nadaf: "It's only natural that the country which protects us deserves that we contribute to its defense."

A predictable condemnation came in the form of a statement from Kairos, a radical **Palestinian** Christian organization that denies the right of Israel to exist and promotes anti-Semitic interpretations of Christian theology.

"Those who call for recruiting Christians to the occupation army do not represent us, do not represent our churches and do not represent the Christians," Kairos says. "We need to be united. We need to protect our national identity. Only our Arab Palestinian identity will be able to protect us and protect our interests."

It's true that this view was once very common among **Arab Christians**. During the last century, Christians were an important presence among the theorists and political leaders of the Arab nationalist movement. Among the Palestinians, the late George Habash, founder of the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine, was a Christian, as was his rival Nayef Hawatmeh, founder of the breakaway Democratic Front, who was born into a Christian tribe in Jordan. And the Ba'ath Party—overthrown in Iraq during the 2003 war but still in power in Syria—was founded by another Christian, Michel Aflaq.

It's widely believed that by the time Aflaq died in 1989, he'd converted to Islam—a faith he equated with revolutionary Arab nationalism. But for Arab Christians, Aflaq's conversion was a

harbinger of the present time, when Islam has superseded nationalism as the main channel for discontent in the Arab world, leaving **Christians** feeling increasingly marginalized.

For that reason, the image of Arab Christians wanting to join the IDF suggests a hitherto unprecedented fracturing of Arab national identity. In an interview with *Inter Press Service*, Bishara Shilyan neatly summarized how this has impacted his community: “Jews call us ‘Arabs.’ For Muslims, we’re ‘Christians,’ not Arabs. We’re Israeli Christians, nothing short of that.”

At a time when Christian communities across the Islamic world are facing vicious persecution in the form of arrests, mob violence and bombings of churches, it’s no coincidence that this assertive form of Christian identity has manifested in democratic Israel. Increasingly, Christians in the Middle East understand that if their faith is to have a future in the region, the states in which they live need to be governed by the values of democracy and tolerance. A state that is Jewish in terms of its identity, but which gives the same rights and demands the same duties of all of its citizens, is truly a revolutionary development for the **Middle East**—and a key reason why so many of its neighbors dream of its destruction.

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