

Election Spotlights

Increasingly Vocal Israeli Christian Community

As Israel's March 17 election nears, some Israeli Christians are using the race as an opportunity to draw more attention to their community. Bolstered by a recent change in Israeli law that allows Christians to self-identity as a distinct ethnic group in the Jewish state, members of that faith are seeking to let their voices be heard.

"We as Christians want to live here together with the Jews, and we have our own issues and needs without any connections to the Arab [political] parties," Shadi Khalloul, who is a candidate for the Knesset with Israeli Foreign Minister Avigdor Liberman's Yisrael Beiteinu party, told .

In the run-up to the Israeli election, the Assembly of the Catholic Ordinaries in the Holy Land—the leading group of Catholic clergy members in Israel, and part of the Latin Patriarchate of Jerusalem—called on Israeli Christians “to go out and vote in the upcoming elections.”

"We say to the voters and to the elected: We are deeply concerned about justice, peace and equality in this country. We care about the human being, whoever he or she is. We promote the mutual acceptance of one and all, facilitating life in justice, peace and tranquility, prosperity and solidarity," the group of Catholic clergy members said.

Israel is home to one of the few remaining growing Christian communities in the Middle East. Yet the Israeli Christian population of 161,000, with most living in Jerusalem or the Galilee region, is still relatively small compared with its Jewish and Muslim counterparts in the country.

For many years, most Christians in Israel identified with Arab culture and played a role in the promotion of pan-Arab nationalism as a way to forge closer bonds with Israel's Arab Muslim community. But in recent years, a growing and vocal group of Israeli Christians have sought to separate themselves from the Arab community by promoting their own unique religious and cultural heritage, while also seeking closer integration with Israeli life—including volunteering for military service.

"Of course, we have some struggles here. The Arabs do not accept us as equals, and the Jews don't understand our real identity and they consider us as Arabs, which is not true," Khalloul, a former paratrooper in the Israel Defense Forces (IDF) and founder of the Israeli Christians Recruitment Forum, which encourages Christian participation in the IDF, told .

Israel is the birthplace of Christianity. The Christian connection to the land pre-dates the Arab-Islamic invasions of the 7th century A.D. Today, as a result of this longtime heritage, modern Israeli Christians generally have a cosmopolitan and global outlook, with higher levels of education and economic standing than many of their Arab Muslim and even Jewish counterparts. Many Israeli Christians maintain close ties with their co-religionists abroad, including through the Catholic or Orthodox churches.

"That's why we have decided to say 'enough is enough,' and we need our own identity in politics and to increase public awareness about us," Khalloul said.

But Natan Sachs, a fellow at the Brookings Institution think tank who researches Israeli politics, downplayed the movement among some Israeli Christians, telling that "by and large Arab Christians see themselves as Palestinian and as part of the larger Arab-Israeli community. So I would take this with a big grain of salt."

Many Christians have long participated in Arab parties, and in this election many may vote for the new United Arab List, an alliance of several smaller Arab parties. Some polls suggest that the joint Arab party may gain up to 14 Knesset seats, making it the third or fourth-largest party in the next Knesset.

"Christians are sometimes prominent in some of the parties that comprise the United Arab List. ... For many years, the communist party (which is today called Hadash) was a natural place for Christians to join because it did not have any Muslim orientation," Sachs said.

Khalloul, however, does not believe the majority of Israel's Christians will vote for the United Arab List.

"They have nothing to do with Israeli Christians. This party is only for Arab Muslims and the majority of Christians will definitely not vote for this party," Khalloul said.

Khalloul, who helped spearhead the recent recognition of Israeli Christians as a separate ethnicity called Arameans, noted that the United Arab List includes members of the Islamic Movement, an anti-Zionist movement that supports Palestinian nationalism.

"[The Islamic Movement] calls for Jerusalem to be the capital of a Palestinian state and for it to be part of the Caliphate like the Islamic State does. This is something we as Christians do not support," he said.

"Voting for this party is like voting for the Islamic State," Khalloul added. "Any Christian voting for this party is betraying his people's needs in Israel."

Last year, the Israeli government took a controversial step in recognizing Christians as their own minority group, independent from the larger Arab community, which is mostly Muslim. As part of this process, Israeli Christians can now

register on their identity cards under the "Aramean" ethnicity, which draws on the distinct history of the region's Christians and is rooted in the Aramaic language and culture.

"The Aramean nationality clearly exists, and has the conditions required to prove its existence, including historical heritage, religion, culture, origin and common language," wrote Israeli Interior Minister Gideon Sa'ar, who spearheaded the Aramean recognition process, in a letter to Israeli Population Authority Chairman Amnon Ben-Ami last September.

Yisrael Beiteinu, for whom Khalloul is running for Knesset, is not the only Israeli political party to reach out to the country's burgeoning Christian population. Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, the head of the Likud party, has met with Father Gabriel Nadaf, a Greek Orthodox priest who has been very vocal in his support for Christian integration and enlistment in the IDF. Members of other parties, such as Jewish Home's MK Ayelet Shaked, have been outspoken in support of Christians. The Knesset Christian Allies Caucus is co-chaired by MK's David Rotem (Yisrael Beiteinu) and Gila Gamliel (Likud).

Christian enlistment in the IDF has grown significantly in the last few years, tripling in each of the last two years and currently standing at about 300 draftees. But many Arab leaders and even some Arab Christians have criticized the enlistment efforts, claiming that they undermine Arab unity.

Israeli Christians say there has been an uptick in attacks or threats against them by their Arab Muslim neighbors in recent years. Christians in Nazareth, the childhood home of Jesus, last year documented a large billboard in the town that warned Christians against slandering Allah, as well as links to a website encouraging them to convert to Islam. Father Nadaf's son, meanwhile, was attacked by an Arab due to his father's support for IDF enlistment.

"I can tell you only one thing, that our destiny would be the same destiny as the Jews here. If the Jews will keep strong, we will be strong. If the Jews will not be strong, then we will not be strong as well," Khalloul said.

He added, "As a Christian, I believe that the only way to strengthen Israel at the end of the day is to keep it a Jewish and democratic state that will defend every citizen regardless of their religion, identity, race, or sex."

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