

The Rising Right-Wing Star in Israeli Politics That Has Even Arabs Buzzing

Read Time: 4 Minutes 50 Seconds

On the closing day of the sixth Christian Media Summit in Jerusalem organized by the Israel Government Press Office, some 150 Christian journalists representing dozens of countries had a lengthy and detailed tour of a Knesset, Israel's parliament, receiving greetings and current event updates from several legislators.

Particularly noteworthy in his absence this year is presumed incoming Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, who had been scheduled to speak at the opening session earlier in the week. Due to last minute negotiations toward the formation of his new government, he was unable to participate.

However, the several who did participate, breaking away from important legislative debates, did so with grace and respect for the group of Christian journalists. Israelis present at the opening session understood that while his cancelation was not announced until the end, by the clear lack of any security presence at the venue, it was clear Netanyahu was not going to attend.

Knesset member Ohad Tal representing the Religious Zionist party spoke while holding a 2000-year-old coin minted during the Jewish revolt against the Romans. Representing both a Jewish religious and nationalist perspective he spoke about how the coin included ancient Hebrew signifying the fight to protect Jerusalem then, and now how we have returned to Jerusalem.

Among the most anticipated speakers was presumptive incoming

Minister of National Security, Knesset member Itamar Ben-Gvir from the Jewish Strength party. He spoke extemporaneously about his vision for Israel and why being Minister of National Security is so significant, referencing restoring security to Israeli citizens and its streets so nobody should be afraid. Mostly in his crosshairs is the combating of terrorism.

Regarding this, he noted that the enemies who seek to harm and destroy Israel are the same enemies who wish to harm Christians. He noted that the war on terrorism is a priority for Jews and Christians. "The joint enemy are jihadists who want to turn the whole world to a caliphate, who say that if you're not Moslem you have no right to live here, those who destroyed the Twin Towers.

"Historical experience is that when we surrender (to them) we get more terror, like the 2005 disengagement from Gaza which (didn't bring peace and only) brought rockets fired (on major Israeli cities)." Summing up he added, "I came to fight terror."

Ben-Gvir noted that the fight is for people who believe in democracy, human rights, and that each nation has the right to live in its land. "Those who want to hurt us also want to hurt you," he said. "I'm fighting for us, but I'm also fighting for you. They may want to start with us, the Jewish nation, but you are next afterward, and all those who don't agree with them. We should not surrender to them or fold before them."

He also addressed an elephant in the room in that, in his youth, he believed that all Arabs should be expelled from Israel, and that he once celebrated the mass murder against Palestinian Arabs in Hebron's Cave of the Patriarchs by Dr. Baruch Goldstein decades earlier. Addressing this he said he used to believe these things, but that's when he was 17.

Now he's 46 years old with six children. He challenged the Christian journalists, many of whom came to faith as adults,

that there are things that they certainly believed or adhered to in their youth which they no longer adhere to now as mature adults, and that's normal.

"I don't think that all Arabs are terrorists. There are many Arabs who want to live in peace. I'm fighting for them as well. Security needs to return to all citizens of Israeli." He noted that he's received calls from Arab mayors and leaders who want to fight a growing trend of Arab crime in Arab communities, and said he will "work with anyone as long as they reject terror."

Regarding peace, Ben-Gvir noted "I believe that there can be peace with the Arabs, but a peace of cooperation not surrender," criticizing previous efforts that did not bring peace and even increased terror.

David Parsons of the International Christian Embassy asked a question relating to Ben-Gvir's view on protecting Christians and Christian sites in Israel. "You have a history of defending Jews who burned a church in the Galilee, who assaulted Arabs, (and inciting extremism at a Christian congregation). What can you say to assure us that you're going to work for minority rights?"

Ben-Gvir responded candidly, "You spoke about cases I represented as a lawyer. I represented all kinds of cases and believed that the defendants were innocent. I do not believe in burning churches or hurting people. I want to assure you that there will be minority rights. We need to be a light unto the nations. I want us to be that. As the only democracy in the Middle East. We are fighting for democracy and the others are fighting against it."

While all the Knesset members received polite applause from the assembly of Christian journalists, because of his strident words in defense of Israel and clear rebuke of his past, Ben-Gvir received particularly warm applause. While this was

taking place, in another part of the Knesset a law was being debated to change the title and responsibilities of the ministry that Ben-Gvir hopes to head.

This proposed law and a series of others are cornerstones upon which the presumptive new government needs to enact in order to make the controversial changes that will place Ben-Gvir as head of a government ministry with extra powers. In addition, there's a law proposed to allow a former convicted Knesset member and government minister to serve as minister again, despite the current law that prevents it.

Noting Ben-Gvir's rise in prominence and influence, he was asked if he'd commit to continue to address the Christian Media Summit in the future, "when you're more important," implying that Ben-Gvir's star is just beginning to rise.

Regardless of the laws that need to be enacted and his current or future positions, the Christian journalists certainly got a taste of why despite being controversial, Ben-Gvir is growing in popularity. {eo}

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