

# Israel Wants Its Arab Christian—but not Muslim—Citizens to Join Military

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Israeli Prime Minister Binyamin Netanyahu announced in August a new forum supposedly designed to improve communication between the government and the country's small Palestinian Christian community.

The innocuous-sounding initiative, however, has sinister implications. The forum's purpose, as Netanyahu boasted during a press conference, is to end the long-established exemption of Christians from serving in the Israeli military.

This is the latest in a series of moves to pressure Christian high school graduates into joining the army, breaking the community's blanket rejection of conscription for the past 65 years.

Leaders of Israel's Palestinian minority have accused Israeli authorities of using the draft as a means to propel the country's Christian and Muslim communities into conflict, as part of Israel's long-term divide-and-rule strategy.

The issue first reared its head last October, when the Defense Ministry quietly staged a conference near Nazareth, the effective capital of Palestinians in Israel, to promote military service among Christians.

The participation of three local clergymen in the conference sent shock waves through the Muslim and Christian communities. Currently both Christians and Muslims, comprising nearly a fifth of Israel's population, are exempt from the draft.

In an apparently related step this past July, a Christian in Nazareth whose brother is an official in the Defense Ministry announced the establishment of the first-ever Christian-Jewish political party, called "Sons of the New Testament," which advocates conscription for Christians.

The new party, which also runs an enlistment forum to encourage Christians to serve in the army, has paired with a far-right Jewish group, Im Tirtzu.

Officials in Nazareth have warned that their city is at risk of becoming a flash point for inter-communal fighting if Israel continues to stir up sectarian tensions.

Dominated by its Christian institutions but with a two-thirds Muslim majority, Nazareth has been struggling to temper sectarian divisions since the late 1990s. That was when the Israeli government promoted a provocative project to build a mosque next to the city's main Christian pilgrimage site, the Basilica of the Annunciation (see articles by Fred Strickert in

the June 1999, Jan./Feb. 2000 and March 2002 issues of the *Washington Report*).

Israel's Palestinian Christians, numbering 125,000, or about 9 percent of the Palestinian minority, are mostly located in Nazareth and its surrounding villages.

The issue of military service is an especially contentious one for the Palestinian minority, said Azmi Hakim, leader of the Greek Orthodox community council in Nazareth.

Most Palestinian citizens refuse to join the army because they reject the role of the Israeli military in oppressing other Palestinians and in enforcing an occupation that violates international law. However, there are strong objections on other grounds.

"Israel has tried to use military service as a way to break us up as a national group since the state's earliest days," Hakim said. "It wants us to be weak, separate religious communities incapable of organizing and demanding our rights."

The Druze community, of a similar size to the Christian one, has been conscripted into the army since the 1950s. As a consequence, Israel designated the Druze a national group distinct from the rest of the Palestinian minority, and created a separate education system to inculcate "Zionist values."

Israel also has persuaded some Bedouin to volunteer as army trackers. Otherwise, only a tiny number of Christian and Muslim Israeli citizens request to have their exemption waived—in most cases, according to scholar Rhoda Kanaaneh, in the hope of accruing extra financial benefits related to army service.

Abir Kopty, a former Nazareth councilor, said that Israel had long tried to instill in Christians an insecurity toward their Muslim neighbors.

"Israel's goal is to make Christians feel like a vulnerable minority and that they will be safer only if they have been trained by the army and have a gun," she said. "We hear Christian youngsters who consider enlistment saying things like, 'I want to protect myself and my family.'"

The pro-enlistment conference held in October was arranged by Ehab Shlayan, a career officer in the Israeli military from Nazareth who was recently appointed the Defense Ministry's "adviser on Christian issues."

It was staged in Upper Nazareth, a Jewish city established on Nazareth's lands in the 1950s. The mayor, Shimon Gapso, an ally of Avigdor Lieberman's far-right Yisrael Beiteinu party, helped sponsor the event.

News of the conference was revealed on social media a short time later. More than 120 Christian teenagers were reported to have attended, mostly drawn from the local Greek Catholic and Maronite scout groups.

However, the fact that three senior clergy from Nazareth took part and spoke in favor of Christian enlistment has caused particular consternation.

They include 39-year-old Bishop Jibril Nadaf, from the Greek Orthodox community, the largest Christian denomination in Israel, and Father Masoud Abu Hatoum, of the Greek

Catholic community.

Nazareth's Greek Orthodox council, an elected body that represents the community's interests in the city, immediately issued a statement denouncing Nadaf's participation. A short time later the patriarch in Jerusalem, Theophilus III, barred Nadaf from entering the Greek Orthodox Church of the Annunciation.

According to the council's Hakim, the chief obstacle to Israel's attempts since the state's creation to recruit Christians to the army—and sever them from the 80 percent of the Palestinian minority who are Muslim—had been finding a religious leader who would give the initiative the stamp of the church's approval.

"Now they think they have a way to split the Christian community by using Nadaf's authority to justify an enlistment drive," he said. "But only the council can speak for the community."

Nadaf has remained defiant. Standing next to Netanyahu at the Aug. 5 press conference, he said: "Our goal is to guard the Holy Land and the State of Israel. We have broken the barrier of fear—the state deserves that we do our part in defending it."

Netanyahu reassured Nadaf and his followers that anyone criticizing him would be dealt with harshly: "We will act to enforce the law with a heavy hand against those who persecute you."

Several Arab members of Israel's parliament have called for Nadaf's dismissal. Likud MK Miri Regev, who heads the Knesset's interior committee, in July criticized the Arab MKs' intervention, calling them "Trojan horses in the Knesset." She accused them of "incitement against a Christian priest."

### **Opponents Interrogated**

Those who have led opposition to the conference have found themselves called in for interrogation by the police and Israel's domestic intelligence service, the Shin Bet. They have been warned that they are under investigation for "incitement to violence."

Hakim said he had been called for interrogation on three occasions since he and the council denounced Nadaf. He was also phoned by the Shin Bet two hours before the Greek Orthodox community council met to issue its statement: "They warned me, 'This is bigger than you or the council.' They told me not to get involved."

He has subsequently faced a hate campaign and death threats. "I received an anonymous phone call identifying my children, my place of work and my home address. I was told people would come for me, to behead me," he said.

Abir Kopty was also called for interrogation after writing a blog post in Arabic and English criticizing those who participated in the conference.

The Shin Bet have demanded of all those brought in for interrogation an unexpected condition: that they agree to provide a DNA sample.

Suhad Bishara, a lawyer with the Adalah legal center for the Arab minority in Israel, said the requirement to submit to a DNA test was illegal in both Hakim and Kopty's cases.

In July Adalah sent a letter to the Israeli attorney general saying there was no basis for an investigation of either of them. “This is clearly a free speech matter,” Bishara said, “and the investigations are a transparent attempt to intimidate and silence them.”

“Sons of the New Testament” founder Bishara Shlayan, a 58-year-old former merchant navy captain, refers to himself as an “Arabic-speaking Israeli Christian.” He told the New York-based Jewish weekly *theAlgemeiner Journal*: “Israel belongs to the Jews, and we are part of it.”

The campaign is reported to already have increased enlistment among high school graduates. According to the *Ma’ariv* newspaper, 90 Christians joined the Israeli military in recent months—a threefold increase from 2010.

Shlayan’s party has sought to play on Christian fears of what it describes as a growing “Muslim threat” in the region, as Islamic movements struggle for power in neighboring countries such as Egypt and Syria.

That message was echoed in an editorial in *The Jerusalem Post*, which rallied to Nadaf’s side: “Trying to survive under the Muslim thumb inside Israel’s Arab sector, Christians have kept a low profile, striven to give no offense and toed even the most extremist line to evince loyalty and avoid risk....Those young Christians now eager to break the cycle should be encouraged, not discouraged.”

According to some observers, Shlayan has received support from a small group of Palestinian Christians based in the nearby town of Kafr Yasif who have adopted Christian Zionist positions. This has led to suggestions that the party may be receiving funds from Christian Zionist groups in the United States.

**Jonathan Cook** is a journalist based in Nazareth and a winner of the Martha Gellhorn Special Prize for Journalism. His most recent book is *Disappearing Palestine*.

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