

Arab Christians, IDF service and the Israeli ultra-nationalist right

By Yossi Alpher

■ Executive summary

A campaign by small numbers of Arab Christians in Israel to encourage volunteer service in the Israel Defence Forces (IDF), backed by leading figures on the Israeli political right, is being played out against a broad backdrop of Middle East dynamics. One is the Palestinian conflict: most Israeli Arab leaders, Christians included, are broadly hostile to the Jewish state and to the volunteer IDF service idea, and support the Palestinian national movement. Another is the Arab revolutionary wave that has generated growing Islamist persecution of Christian communities in the Levant and Egypt, where they were once pioneers of Arab nationalism.

The entire issue points to the growing isolation of two Middle East entities: Israel and the region's ancient Christian communities. Some Israeli rightists openly acknowledge Arab Christian military service as a way to coopt Israel's small Christian community, "de-Arabise" it and thereby weaken the overall strength of the large Palestinian minority in Israel. Some of Israel's Christian Arabs involved in the military service campaign seek to portray themselves as Arameans, not Arabs – a concept with roots among Lebanon's Maronites. The Israeli ultra-nationalist political right also apparently sees Arab Christian IDF service as a means of winning favour with Christians in the West.

The years since 2011 have witnessed the rise of extreme Islam throughout many parts of the Arab Middle East, from the relatively political Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt to the barbaric Islamic State in Iraq and Syria. Nearly everywhere, Christians have been targeted by the Islamists for persecution or discrimination, some undergoing forced conversion and many fleeing from age-old ancestral homes, from Mosul in northern Iraq to Maaloula in Syria. Here and there related Christian-Muslim tensions have emerged in Europe as well.

It is against this backdrop of Muslims targeting Christians that the situation in Israel warrants our attention. Right-wing Jewish nationalist politicians from the ruling Likud party – the very same faction that has pushed measures for "loyalty oaths" and cancelling Arabic as an official national language – have undertaken to separate Arab Christians from the overall Arab population, "de-Arabise" them and recruit their loyalty to the Jewish state. The right wingers apparently seek thereby to weaken increasingly vocal

Israeli Arab opposition to the state and to recruit international Christian support for Israel. A relatively small portion of Israel's Christian Arab population is cooperating in this endeavour and has undertaken to encourage volunteer Christian service in the Israel Defence Forces (IDF). In almost all cases these Christians quite naturally see their pro-Israel efforts as a means of advancing their own material well-being.

This expert analysis describes and assesses this dynamic and its potential Israeli and regional ramifications.

The Israeli backdrop

There are about 150,000 Arab Christians in Israel, or slightly under 2% of the population (the overall population of Israeli Arab citizens, who are overwhelmingly Sunni Muslim, is 18% of the total). In recent years the Israeli Arab intellectual and political leadership, including Christian members of Knesset (MKs), has campaigned vehemently against attempts to term Israel a "Jewish state", both

constitutionally and as a condition for a two-state solution with the Palestine Liberation Organisation (PLO) leadership based in the West Bank. Israeli Arab leaders demand to be called “Palestinian citizens of Israel” and broadly insist, in a variety of formulations, that Israel become a bi-national state, thereby staking out a more extreme position than even the PLO, which rejects the term “Jewish state”, but abjures any attempt to dictate the nature of the Israeli state within the framework of a two-state solution.

Throughout its nearly seven decades of existence Israel has done relatively little to integrate its Arab population, Christian or Muslim, into mainstream government institutions. One key reason has been the sensitive nature of the entire Israeli state-building enterprise, surrounded as the country is by a hostile Arab world. A complementary factor is Israeli Arab insistence on identifying with the Arab cause in general and the Palestinian cause in particular, even as Israel has remained in a state of war with much of the Arab world. Until recently Christian Arabs have been no exception to this dynamic. At the same time recent years have witnessed the greater integration of Israeli Arabs into key sectors of the economy and educational and health institutions in response to the country’s dynamic manpower needs, fueled by a booming economy.

Polls indicate that a majority of Israeli Arabs are not heavily invested in their political leadership’s anti-Jewish state campaign. While they do not observe Israel Independence Day and will not sing the national anthem, “HaTikva”, most Israeli Arabs would suffice broadly with an enhancement of their economic, educational and civil status. Nevertheless, the growing militancy of the Israeli Arab leadership, coupled with the plight of Arab Christians elsewhere in the Middle East and the increasingly obvious fact that Israel’s avoidance of accepting the basic conditions for a two-state solution (e.g. a settlement freeze and two capitals in Jerusalem) is isolating the country internationally, have led the Likud leadership to adopt a new policy toward Arab Christians in Israel.

From Prime Minister Netanyahu down, Likud is embracing the cause of a few relatively isolated Israeli Arab Christians who openly advocate voluntary military service as a means of identifying with the state and its Zionist underpinnings. Note that under Israeli law only Jews are subject to compulsory service; many Druze and Bedouin volunteer, but until now only a trickle of Christian and Muslim Arabs have done so.

An extreme expression of this pro-Israel Christian Arab sentiment, also encouraged by the state, is an attempt by Maronite Christian citizens of Israel to “rebrand” Israeli Arabs as Arameans (Aramaic is the language of Maronite prayer and some Jewish prayer; Jesus almost certainly spoke Aramaic), claim an ancient pre-Muslim heritage and reject an Arab identity entirely. Even a move by the (Jewish) right wing to extend the Israeli weekend to include Sunday appears to be aimed at portraying Israel as part and parcel of Western culture, which is based largely on Christianity.

An ancillary goal of the government’s encouragement of Christian “Israelisation” is to combat anti-Israel divestment campaigns among Western Protestant denominations like the Presbyterians and rebuff ostensibly pro-Palestinian sentiments among Mennonites, Quakers and others. This at a time when the PLO portrays Jesus as a Palestinian and Palestinians as a people whose presence in the land pre-dates Islam.

The entire Christian-Israel dynamic is unfolding amid an atmosphere of increased violence against Christians not only on the part of Arab Islamists, but in Israel as well. The government’s encouraging approach is particularly ironic in view of the fact that some of its more extreme messianic settler allies, with their violent anti-Arab “price tag” campaigns, have targeted not only mosques, but also churches and monasteries. On the other hand, Israeli Arab Christians have also been the target of Muslim and Druze violence, usually in mixed villages.

Here the history of Christian involvement in Arab political and strategic affairs over the past 100 years should be mentioned. Lebanese and Syrian Christians were among the pioneers of the Arab nationalist movement, which paralleled the rise of Zionism in Palestine some 100 years ago. The secular socialist Ba’th party that ruled Iraq and still rules Syria was founded and initially headed by Christians (the Syrian Ba’th is still headed by a member of a minority sect, the Alawites, and favours non-Muslim minorities like Druze and Christians). Coptic Christians were among the leaders of Egyptian democratic institutions in the early twentieth century. Secular Palestinian nationalist movements like the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine and the Democratic Front for the Liberation of Palestine were founded and led by Christians like George Habash and Naef Hawatmeh.

If this history of major Christian involvement in the essentially secular Arab nationalist movement now appears anachronistic to some Arab Christians, the explanation lies in the rise of militant Islam throughout the Middle East, including among the Arab citizens of Israel. While some Middle East Christians have for decades quietly told Israeli Jews, “first Sunday, then Saturday” – meaning that if Israel did not protect Christians from persecution by Islam, Israel would be next – in day-to-day terms Arab Christians never openly sought to identify with Israel, whether for reasons of Arab identity, realpolitik or Christian anti-Semitism. (The only significant departure from this Arab nationalist pattern took place between 1975 and 1983, when a portion of the Lebanese Maronite Christians who dominate Lebanese Christian life made common cause with Israel against the PLO and Syria – an enterprise that ended, from the Israeli standpoint, in betrayal by the Maronites and left a poisoned legacy of Israeli-Christian relations in the region.)

Now a few Christian Israeli Arabs, in collaboration with parts of the Israeli right wing, appear to be wagering that this reality is changing.

The current dynamic

The main protagonist of the Christian military service movement in Israel is Father Gabriel Nadaf, a Greek Orthodox priest from Nazareth who heads the Israel Christian Recruitment Forum (ICRF) and campaigns for close Arab Christian integration into Israeli institutions. Nadaf claims that a growing number of Arab Christian men and women, including his own son, volunteered for IDF service or alternative civilian service in the past year. He wants the IDF to appoint Christian chaplains and asks that the government's Civil Service Commission exercise affirmative action in appointing Christian veterans to government service. He is trying to reach out to both the Israeli political left and right.

Nadaf has been castigated by the Greek Orthodox establishment, which represents the majority of Christians in Israel; the leaders of the Greek Catholic Church in Israel are also reportedly opposed to Christian IDF service. According to some reports, Nadaf has even been removed from his parish – an allegation he denies. He also complains of harassment and physical attacks by fellow Arabs.

A parallel effort to Nadaf's has been undertaken by a group of IDF reserve combat officers from the Maronite Christian sect, a small minority among the country's Christians. In recent months they have severed ties with Nadaf and founded an "Aram" group dedicated to reviving the Aramaic language in Israel. Their leader, Shadi Khalloul, has over the past five summers brought Maronite youth to an Aramean heritage summer camp held in the ruins of the Maronite villages of Ikrit and Biram, on Israel's border with Lebanon. The villages' inhabitants were evacuated in 1948 on the orders of the IDF and never allowed to return, despite Israel High Court decisions to the contrary.

Khalloul claims that his movement has thousands of Israeli Christian adherents (not only Maronites, but Greek Orthodox and even Baptists) who seek to adopt an Aramaic identity that broadly invokes Middle Eastern Christian roots preceding the advent of Islam. But he also has a narrower Maronite point of view. He hopes that Christian military service will eventually pave the way toward government permission for Maronites to re-establish Ikrit and Biram: "If we continue to shout about Arab and Palestinian nationalism", he stated in February 2014, "nothing will move ahead". He is careful not to invoke the term "return", which is identified with displaced Palestinian Arabs; rather, he calls for new Maronite villages to be permitted on the sites of the old. And he acknowledges that the Aramean movement is a direct continuation of a "Phoenician" pre-Christian identity movement that the more extreme Lebanese Maronites tried to market to Israelis back in the days of Israeli-Maronite cooperation preceding the 1982-83 fiasco. Khalloul has joined the Yisrael Beitenu party, whose leader, Avigdor Lieberman, advocates a two-state solution under which Israeli Arabs who refuse to identify with the underpinnings of Israeli statehood would adopt Palestinian citizenship.

The outgoing Netanyahu government (Knesset elections are set for March 17th 2015) has responded with encouragement and incentives. On December 14th 2014 Netanyahu visited an ICRF Christmas event. At government instigation, a pro-Israel U.S. philanthropic organisation that represents primarily evangelical Christian interests distributed Christmas food coupons to needy Christian families through the ICRF rather than through Arab Christian municipalities. In September 2014 the Ministry of the Interior recognised the Aramean minority as a separate nationality, allowing a few hundred families to register as Arameans rather than as Arabs or merely Christians.

Yariv Levin, MK, outgoing Likud coalition chairman and, along with militant young Likud firebrands like deputy minister Ofir Akunis, a leading campaigner for "Aramean" rights and Christian IDF service, stated forthrightly in September 2014 that he sought to distinguish between Christian and Muslim citizens and to deepen the involvement of the Christian population in Israeli society. Earlier in the year Levin sponsored legislation awarding Christian Arabs separate and larger representation on a key equal employment opportunity commission. At the time he stated that this would "connect us to the Christians, and I am careful not to refer to them as Arabs, because they are not Arabs".

The IDF says that around 150 Christian Arabs currently serve in the conscript army and a similar number in the career army, with around 50 signing up each year for three years of service. These figures appear to call into question the claim by Father Nadaf that the numbers of Christian army volunteers are actually rising significantly and have reached around 135 a year. The ICRF also claims that over 400 young Christian women are currently doing civilian volunteer service (a recognised alternative to military service). In April 2014 the IDF began sending "voluntary draft notices" to an estimated 800 Arab Christian youth who had reached conscription age.

Whether or not the Christian recruitment campaign is successful, the Israeli Arab political establishment has reacted to it angrily. Bassel Ghattas, an Arab Christian MK, spoke out in April 2014 against "the campaign by the Israeli right to divide Christians from their own people by encouraging them to think that they are not Arabs". In early 2014 more than 15 Israeli Arab youth movements and community organisations condemned "plans for the Israelisation" of Palestinians and vowed to "struggle against enlistment in the Israeli army". In September Ahmed Tibi, a prominent Muslim MK, condemned recognition of the Aramean nationality as a "high-handed attempt to divide and rule the Arab minority in Israel. The Christians are an authentic part of the national Arab Palestinian minority in Israel, and no right-wing political decision will change this fact." Moderate Arab columnist Oudeh Basharat wrote in *Haaretz* in April, "There is nothing like the calls for separatism by the Christian sects, as manifested in the call for enlistment in the IDF, to pour fuel on the extremist Islamist flames".

Nor is Arab protest limited to Palestinian citizens of Israel. "Palestinian Christians are not a separate minority but form an integral part of the Palestinian people", stated the Palestinian Authority's Presidential Committee for Christian Affairs in February. Notably, while the Christian population continues to dwindle in East Jerusalem, the West Bank and Gaza as it does in the rest of the Arab world, Christians remain well represented in West Bank government and educational institutions.

Conclusion

Are Christian Arabs in Israel, driven by alienation from an increasingly Islamist Arab world, now beginning to seek greater political integration and fairer treatment through the vehicle of military service? Does Israeli encouragement for this phenomenon, primarily on the political right, reflect something that can be called a noble motive of integrating Arabs into the Israeli mainstream? After all, Jews who are compelled to serve in the IDF cannot but take a measure of satisfaction in seeing more non-Jewish Israelis expressing loyalty to Israel and serving as well. Or are these the fantasies of marginalised Christian Arabs and messianic, megalomaniacal and essentially racist Jewish politicians – a pale echo of apartheid divide-and-rule tactics that failed long ago in South Africa?

One test would seem to lie in the readiness of the Jewish political mainstream to encourage and incentivise voluntary national service, whether military or civilian, among both Muslim and Christian Arabs; initial steps in this direction have indeed been taken. Another is the readiness of that same mainstream to apply itself more diligently and

sincerely to the question of a two-state solution: the achievement of Palestinian national rights in a state alongside Israel would make it far easier for all concerned to sort out the issues involved in allegiance to the state of Israel on the part of its Arab citizens, both Muslim and Christian. In this sense, the conceivable advent of a centre-left governing coalition after Israel's March 17th elections would offer another interesting test of the staying power of the Christian military service phenomenon. Yet another test might be "Aramean" success in Israeli elections, whether at the local village level or nationally.

The issue of Christian Arabs serving in the IDF would be of marginal strategic import at best if it were not for two regional factors: the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, which is increasingly taking on the attributes of a Jewish-Muslim religious war with extremists on both sides calling the shots, and the persecution of Christians by militant Islamists. In the years to come attacks by Islamists on Christians and their churches will almost certainly continue in the Middle East, from Egypt to Iraq. The vicissitudes of sectarian strife in the region could yet occasion appeals by ethnic minorities, including Christians, for help from Israel.

We can anticipate that at least some Arab Christians in Israel will continue – with or even without government encouragement – to seek further integration into the Jewish-dominated mainstream through military service. This will engender controversy not only among the country's Palestinian Arab citizenry, but also among Christians elsewhere in the Middle East and even beyond. ■

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