

Israeli Christians seek integration, including army service

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HEBRON HILLS, West Bank (RNS) Preparing his jeep for the short drive into the West Bank city of Hebron, where tensions between Palestinians and Israeli settlers often flare, Nabeel Sabbagh looked like every other Israeli Border Policeman serving this hilltop base.

He was probably the only one with a crucifix tucked under his uniform.

An Arab Catholic from the northern Israeli city of Upper Nazareth, Sabbagh covered up the necklace “so it won’t get caught on anything—not to hide my religion.”

Sabbagh is one of the very small but growing number of Israel’s 160,000 indigenous Christians who, despite being exempt from military service, choose to do it on a voluntary basis. Others spend the year after high school performing civilian National Service in places like schools and hospitals.

Community leaders say the controversial trend stems from a desire to integrate more into the larger Israeli society, and the best way to do this, they believe, is by serving the country.

A graduate of an Israeli military high school, Sabbagh, 21, said he volunteered “because Israel is my country. I was born here. I live here and I’ll die here.”

Indigenous Christians say they can trace their roots back 2,000 years to the time of Jesus. But they complain they feel sometimes like second-class citizens in the Jewish homeland and are denied top private-sector jobs and positions in government.

Israel's legislature, the Knesset, voted recently to give Christians a seat on the Equal Employment Opportunities advisory council to address job discrimination, and the U.S. State Department has rapped Israel in past reports for alleged failure to guarantee the rights of all Christians living there.

Christians here say they want to be considered full citizens not only in the eyes of the law but of the people, as well. Joining in Israel's defense is one way to do that, they say.

About 300 Christians volunteer at any given time for two to three years in the Israel Defense Forces, not including the number of career soldiers serving, according to the Christian IDF Forum, a group created in 2012 to improve integration through military service. There are 1,500 Christians serving in the police and more than 100 in the paramilitary Border Police.

"If we don't integrate we will remain marginalized," says Shadi Haloul, spokesman for the Christian IDF Forum.

"This country protects us, gives us freedom of religion, so why shouldn't I defend it?" said Haloul, 38, a former Israeli paratrooper.

Haloul is a Maronite Christian, followers of Jesus who established a home in the northern mountains of Lebanon and trace their origin to Maron, a 5th-century monk and saint.

Haloul said volunteering for the military is a way for indigenous Christians to forge their own identity, distinct not only from Israel's Muslims but from the Arab population as a whole. Most indigenous Christians claim they have an Arab heritage, but many like Haloul do not and the number who claim their own distinct ethnicity is growing.

"People forget that we Christians were here centuries before the Arabs conquered the land and forced us to speak the Arabic language. We are not Arabs and we are not Palestinians," Haloul insisted.

Israel is seen as encouraging this shift in thinking, seeing indigenous Christians as allies in an overwhelmingly Muslim region.

The Israeli government wants more Christians to serve in the IDF because "it strengthens the solidarity of Israel, and shows that not all of Israel's minorities are

complaining,” said Deputy Defense Minister Danny Danon. “We respect them and see them as a role model,” for all Israeli citizens.

Danon speaks to groups of Christian high school students about their importance to the country, and he emphasizes the benefits, such as preferred mortgage rates for Israelis who perform military and national service.

But not all Christians like it.

In October, the Ministry of Defense held a pro-enlistment conference in Nazareth attended by more than 100 Christian youths. A Greek Orthodox priest who attended, Jibril Naddaf, was criticized by members of his own church for taking part. His son, who will be joining the IDF this spring, was physically assaulted, he said.

Haloul said Christians looking to integrate in a country that is 80 percent Jewish face “many objections” and even harassment, mostly from Muslims, but also from Christians.

“Not everyone is behind us,” he acknowledged.

Among the detractors are Palestinian Christians.

The integrationists “do not represent us, do not represent our churches, and do not represent the Christians,” according to the Palestinian Christian Initiative, a group that mobilizes Christians against Israeli policies in the disputed territory of the West Bank.

Several of Israel’s Arab parliamentarians have also come out against the campaign, insisting that it undermines Palestinian unity against Israeli policies. Israel has 1.7 million Arabs. Nearly all are Muslim and the vast majority are citizens of Israel who are eligible to serve in the military but not required to do so, and have the right to vote for representatives in the Knesset.

Accompanying a contingent of Romanian clerics through the Old City of Jerusalem, where he serves as the Israel Police’s liaison between various Christian denominations, Inspector Johnny Kassabri, a Catholic who grew up in Nazareth, believes indigenous Christians have an important role to play in Israeli society.

“There are people who see serving the country as something against the Palestinian people,” said Kassabri, 39, who joined the police 17 years ago.

“But I advise young people in the community to serve this country because we live in Israel, and that comes with both rights and responsibilities.”