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ISRAËL: Netanyahu assures no law against Christian missionaries

ISRAËL: Netanyahu assures no law against Christians after missionary bill outrage

Evangelical Christian groups have supported the Zionist cause in various capacities for decades, and have close relationships with Israeli institutions.

By MAYA ZANGER-NADIS, MICHAEL STARR

Jerusalem Post (24.03.2023) – After a bill punishing Christian missionaries with prison time for any type of proselytization caused furor among pro-Israel Evangelicals on Sunday, Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu publicly assured that the State of Israel would not pass legislation targeting Christians.

“We will not advance any law against the Christian community,” Netanyahu wrote on Twitter in both English and Hebrew on Wednesday.

United Torah Judaism leader Moshe Gafni also released a statement on Wednesday, noting that the bill would not be advanced at this stage. The bill, which is identical to other bills on this matter promoted by Gafni, was placed procedurally on the Knesset table four months ago.

US Christian response to Netanyahu's assurances

US Christian leaders and political actors welcomed Netanyahu's response to their concerns.

“Prime Minister Netanyahu is an amazing leader of courage,” said Sam Brownback, ex-Kansas governor and former US ambassador for International Religious Freedom. “I applaud his quick and decisive addressing of what could have been a major issue.”

Evangelist Pastor Greg Laurie said on Wednesday that Gafni and Netanyahu's comments were "great news."

Penny Nance, head of Christian Evangelical nonprofit Concerned Women for America, also thanked Netanyahu on Thursday for "standing up for Christians," after she had warned of the repercussions of the bill if it passed.

"If this became law. Evangelicals on tour from the US if led by the Holy Spirit to share the Gospel with their tour guide would risk imprisonment," Nance said on Wednesday.

Pastor Jack Graham joined the chorus of those expressing disconcertion about the bill, saying "I love Israel and we need to be praying for Israel and its leaders."

The outrage over the bill began after a Sunday report by Christian Evangelical outlet All Israel News. Editor-in-Chief Joel C. Rosenberg credited the outlet for raising awareness of the issue.

"I am deeply grateful to Israeli Prime Minister Netanyahu for his strong, unequivocal statement," said Rosenberg on Wednesday. "The Evangelical community worldwide greatly appreciates your friendship. Bless you."

The bill would amend preexisting proselytization provisions in

the 1977 Penal Code, which hold that forbids missionary action through material enticement, persuading minors to convert, or holding conversion ceremonies without the consent of parents. Visitors to Israel may also be denied entry into the country if they were traveling for missionary purposes.

The amendment would change the crime to apply to all conversion attempts “directly, digitally, by direct mail, or online. The maximum prison sentence would be a year for conversion attempts of an adult, whereas the previous six-month sentence for those proselytizing against minors would be increased to two years.

The explanatory notes of the bill contend that there have recently been increased attempts by mostly Christian missionary groups. These proselytization attempts didn't violate the law because they didn't involve material enticement.

Negative consequences such as “mental damage” and concern that missionaries targeted vulnerable segments of society required legislators to act, the bill said.

Indeed, there have been notable cases of late of Israeli Jewish Orthodox community members being revealed as Christian missionaries.

In April 2021, a French Hill family from New Jersey was revealed to be Christian missionaries. The father posed as a rabbi, mohel and sofer. The mother claimed to be the daughter of an Auschwitz survivor. A Seattle man who made Aliya and lived in Jerusalem was accused of posing as a Jew and being a

missionary in May 2021.

In December, The Collegiate Association for the Research of Principles, which is connected to a messianic South Korean cult, was accused of distributing flyers to youth in Jerusalem inviting them to an event.

In 2022, the Central Bureau of Statistics said that 182,000 Christians lived in Israel, making up about 1.9% of its population.

Peggy Cidor, Sam Halpern and Jeremy Sharon contributed to this report.

Photo: Head of the Finance committee MK Moshe Gafni leads a Finance committee meeting at the Knesset, the Israeli parliament in Jerusalem, on January 17, 2023.

[Further reading about FORB in Israël on HRWF website](#)

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