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Lebanese Jew: 'We want an MP'



If one were to ask Lebanese about their opinions on the Orthodox Gathering draft electoral law, the answers would probably either

be “odiously sectarian” or “rectifying representation and alleviating fears.” Yet there is a third opinion we have yet to hear about.

“Voters exclusively elect candidates of their own sect. Christian voters of minority sects shall vote for minority candidates whereas Muslim voters of minority sects that are not represented by any parliamentary seat shall have the right to vote for the Muslim candidates of their choice regardless of their sects. Jewish voters shall have the right to vote for the Muslim or Christian candidates of their choice.”

The above passage, paragraph C of Article 2 of the Orthodox Gathering offered, knowingly or unknowingly, a way out of elections for those who wish: Be a Jew and vote for the Muslim or Christian candidate of your choice. Some opponents of the Orthodox Gathering draft on social networking sites are actually pondering the idea of converting to Judaism in order to take part “freely” in the 2013 elections should the draft be adopted in the plenary session of parliament and come into effect. But what do ethnic Jews want?

“Our community should be represented in parliament. We are the only Jewish community in the Arab world that enjoys constitutional protection, but we are not politically represented,” says Michel Zilkha, a Lebanese Jew who decided to speak publicly to NOW because “it is important not to remain anonymous if we want to obtain our rights.”

No electoral law ever adopted in Lebanon has earmarked seats for the Jewish community. The 128 seats of the current parliament, including those of minority sects, are divided equally between Christians and Muslims.

Former Deputy Speaker Elie al-Ferzli, who is considered ‘the father’ of the Orthodox Gathering draft, explained to NOW that “Jews can file for candidacy if the community is accounted for as part of the minority sects’ share.” However, Ferzli went on to say that this seat is earmarked for Christian minorities in the Beirut constituency, and is part of the [Christian minorities’] share. Following the Ta’if Accord, the Alawite community, which is considered a minority, obtained two seats of its own, one in Tripoli and the other in Akkar.

The Jewish community’s attempts to gain parliamentary representation date back to 1937, a year that witnessed parliamentary reforms bringing the number of parliamentary seats from 26 to 60. The Jewish community hoped then that it would obtain a seat as part of the new bloc. Joseph Farhi, president of the Jewish Council, visited then-President Émile Eddé, said at the time: “It is vital for our interests to be represented in parliament.” Eddé was receptive in principle to this demand, but [French] High Commissioner

[Damien] de Martel showed little enthusiasm for earmarking a parliamentary seat for the Jewish community.

The battle for seats between the government of Kheireddine al-Ahdab and its opponents ended with the adoption of new divisions with 63 seats (42 elected and 21 appointed ones) with one seat added for minorities. Non-Jew Dr. Ayoub Tabet was appointed to fill it and the Jewish community, which numbered 6,000 at the time, remained unrepresented in parliament.

This history supports Zilkha's belief that Jews have no seats in parliament "due to a sacrosanct agreement between Christians and Muslims" on the division of power. He asserts that Lebanon's Jews need someone to represent them and defend their rights, saying: "During the war, our properties were [forcefully] occupied and when my father showed the police court-obtained documents to recover buildings he owned, they said: 'when you Jews return Palestine to us, we will return your buildings to you.'" He went on: "This was the case with many Jews who lost their property because we do not have any representative or political party to stand for us."

Despite the 'privilege' offered by the Orthodox Gathering draft, Zilkha believes that it is pointless to take part in the elections: "I think I will not vote because we are not represented." Many among Lebanon's Jews have changed their religious affiliation on their IDs out of fear of persecution. "It might come as a surprise to some that many companies currently operating in Lebanon are owned by Jews." He revealed that Lebanon is home to about 1,000 Jews, both residents and visitors, adding: "*Shabbat* dinners are secretly held, and so are celebrations featuring popular artists."

When asked about his ties as a Jew with the State of Israel, Zilkha said: "I get this question all the time. We are Lebanese Jews, much like Lebanese Christians and Lebanese Muslims. We are stuck here because Lebanon is our nation and our identity. Lebanon is there whenever we speak, live, eat, and breathe. Yet some dare say we are not 'Lebanese', so what are we then? The [Lebanese] Jews who emigrated to Europe and America went to cities with a Lebanese diaspora. This is no coincidence, for we are one people. The majority of them refused to go to Israel even though they were offered security and money. The majority chose to go to Paris, New York, or Montreal instead. We are Lebanese, Lebanese Jews who never emigrated to Israel as did the Jews of Iraq and Syria because they were protected as a community. Israel, for me, is like Mecca for Muslims and the Vatican for Christians: It is nothing more than a religious link."

With regard to the Arab-Israeli conflict, Zilkha said that Arab Jews and Palestinians have paid the dearest price: "Jews were massacred in Europe and they wanted a country to protect them. Israel did, albeit at the expense of the Palestinians, which were

neither in Europe nor took part in the Holocaust, so why are they suffering? What Europe's Jews did was to come up with the idea of a homogeneous 'Jewish people' whereas we, in reality, are brothers sharing the same faith." His concludes: "This is partly why some believe that every Jew is Israeli."

In this context, Zilkha described what he referred to as the 'marginalization' targeting Eastern Jews in Israel, saying: "Leadership positions in Israel all went to the Ashkenazi (Western Jews). Still, the other side is also to blame for this marginalization. When the state of Israel was founded in 1948, Jews in Iraq, Syria, and elsewhere were evicted from their homes. Why? These innocent people who have nothing to do with what is happening to the Palestinians were thrown out of their respective countries following thousands of years of contribution to the rich culture of these communities. Palestinians and Arab Jews have been victims of many mistakes indeed."

Zilkha is planning to return to Lebanon as soon as he finishes his studies in the United States. He hopes that the opening of the Magen Abraham synagogue, which is scheduled for this summer, will act as a prelude to a revival of the community's presence in Lebanon. "We will finally be able to pray in public rather than in homes, as we used to do during the civil war... People will go to the synagogue again," he said. Still, his hope is fraught with caution: "Let us not be naïve. Lebanon is still a dangerous country... Our businesses and properties were stolen and the state did not stand up for us. My family lost hope a long time ago but it stayed in Lebanon because we had nowhere else to go."

This article is a translation of the original Arabic