

In Israel, priest draws fire for preaching Christians are not Arabs

by [Ben Lynfield](#)

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([The Christian Science Monitor](#)) A Greek Orthodox priest who has advocated a non-Arab identity for members of Israel's Christian community is being alternately vilified and praised for spearheading a government campaign to drive a wedge between Christian and Muslim Israelis.

Two years ago, few people beyond his church in Yefia, near the mixed Muslim and Christian city of Nazareth, had heard of Father Gabriel Naddaf. Today he is Israel's most-talked-about Christian clergyman.

Naddaf's influence is on the rise after receiving, in recent weeks, greater government backing for his agenda of breaking off Christians from the rest of Israel's Arab minority, infusing them with a new-old national identity, and aligning with the Jewish majority, including by serving in the army.

"I would have to say that miracles are happening," Naddaf said in an interview at a cafe in Jewish Upper Nazareth, an area where he feels more comfortable—and safer—than around his apartment in the adjacent Arab town of Nazareth.

Naddaf's virtues are very much in the eye of the beholder. To Arab nationalists, both Muslim and Christian, he is a "traitor" and a serious threat to the cohesion of the Arab minority. To his admirers on the Israeli right, he is a courageous friend of Israel and an emerging point man for realizing their growing ambition of splitting off the Christians from what is seen as a hostile Muslim population.

The Christians, many of whom have played key roles in Arab and Palestinian nationalism, are a minority within a minority. Arabs make up about one fifth of Israel's population, and roughly 10 percent of them are Christians, who are on the whole more urban and better educated. While the political identities of Israel's Christians and Muslims have historically been close, in recent years Christians have felt increasingly pressured by the growth of radical Islam at home and in the region.

Naddaf said God is acting in his life, giving him the strength to endure enmity to his efforts and persist. The most recent miracle, in his view, was the government's decision last month to recognize the ancient nationality of "Aramean" in the population registry.

Naddaf, who was among those to press for the change, stresses that this will give Christians an opportunity for the first time to define themselves, officially, according to what he maintains was their original identity before the Arab and Islamic conquest of the 7th century led to the "erasure" of the Aramean language and culture.

"I'm certain the Christians are not Arab and don't belong to the Arab nation," said Naddaf, 40, who wants to see Aramean heritage and language taught in schools.

His statements have been seized upon by Israeli government officials. Yariv Levin, the coalition chairman from Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's Likud party, uses similar language to Naddaf's in talking about the need to split Christians from Muslims.

"They are not really Arabs; we will turn them into our allies," Levin said in an interview with the *Maariv* newspaper early this year. "Between us and the Christians, there is much in common. They are a counterweight to the Muslims who want to destroy the state from within. The Christians are also worried about extremist Islam. If we know how to give proper treatment to their population, they will join the army."

Naddaf's views, however, are very much in the minority among Christian Israeli Arabs, and are vehemently dismissed by clergy in the West Bank.

"To go back thousands of years and say we are Arameans is a denial of our own identity and mission as Christians living in this land," said Jamal Khader, rector of the Latin Patriarchate Seminary in Beit Jala, near Bethlehem. "We are Arabs, we speak Arabic, that's our culture and identity and that's how we can witness and live our faith in this community."

The Aramean identity some want to see revived is based largely on a connection to the Aramean language, Aramaic, as the language of the early church fathers, according to Steven Fassberg, a specialist in ancient Semitic languages at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem. Aramaic, which dates back in the archeological

record to the tenth century BC, was spoken in Syria, Israel and Turkey and was the lingua franca of the area that is today the Middle East from the sixth century BC to the Arab conquest. It remains spoken in tiny pockets of the region, and is present in Christian and Jewish liturgies.

Yitzhak Reiter, a Hebrew University scholar of Israel's Arab minority and former deputy government adviser on Arab affairs, estimates that only a few dozen Israeli Christians self-identify as Aramean.

Basel Ghattas, a Christian member of the Knesset, Israel's parliament, from the Arab nationalist Balad party, said Naddaf's assertion that the Christians are not Arabs makes him a "traitor to his nationality and people."

"Of course his activities pose a threat because the whole intention is divide and rule," Ghattas said.

Naddaf's unprecedented call two years ago for Christians to enlist in the Israeli army was strongly backed by the prime minister's office. It is this government support that is making him an important factor in discussions of Israel's policy toward its Christian Arab citizens.

Naddaf said he sees serving in the army, from which Arabs have traditionally been exempt, as the only way to integrate in Israeli society.

"You can't prove your loyalty and be an ally of the others unless you serve in the army," he said.

Naddaf's son was assaulted and badly beaten last year for these views, but the priest said that the 18-year-old is now about to join the army.

Netanyahu welcomed Naddaf warmly in his office last year and assigned a deputy minister, Ofir Akunes, to work on advancing Christian army enlistment.

In the view of Khader of the Latin seminary, however, serving in the army violates the gospels since it means enforcing the occupation in the West Bank. "It means using violence against Palestinians, contributing to the oppression of the Palestinians."