

Religious freedom or nighttime noise? Israelis debate call to prayer

by [Joel Greenberg](#) in the [May 10, 2017](#) issue

([\*The Christian Science Monitor\*](#)) Shortly before noon, the Muslim call to prayer rang out from the imposing Al-Omari Mosque across the mixed Jewish-Arab town of Ramla, wafting over a crowded market. No one seemed to pay heed, aside from a small group of men who assembled for the noon prayer.

But the call from the loudspeakers is now on the front line of a conflict in Israel. Israel's parliament, the Knesset, is considering two bills that would silence mosque loudspeakers, at least during night hours, on the grounds that they cause an unnecessary noise disturbance. The issue has caused heated debate about the place of religion in public space in Israel.

Sponsors of the bill say it is designed to prevent noise pollution. Moti Yogev, a rightist parliament member who has sponsored one of the bills, told the legislature that the proposed law expressed "the simple principle according to which freedom of religion should not harm the sleep and quality of life of citizens."

Talal Abu Ara, a member of the United Arab List, the Arab party in parliament, calls the bill "antidemocratic and designed to harm Muslim freedom of religion."

"For hundreds of years the call to prayer did not bother anyone, and now suddenly it does? This is part of the incitement against Arabs and Muslims in general. We will not honor this law and continue calling to prayer as usual," he said.

During a debate when the bills passed a preliminary vote, Ayman Odeh, the Joint List leader, tore up a copy of the bill as other Arab lawmakers shouted "Allahu Akbar" (God is great). Arabs, both Muslim and Christian, make up about 20 percent of Israel's citizens.

The controversial bills have been backed by Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, who said Israel was trying to strike a balance: "Israel is committed to freedom for all religions but is also responsible for protecting citizens from noise."

Yedidia Stern, vice president of the Israel Democracy Institute, an independent think tank, said Israel already has noise regulations in place that could be enforced against unduly loud calls of the muezzin, the Arabic term for the one who calls Muslims to prayer.

The new legislation, Stern said, was introduced by “some parliament members pushing a nationalist agenda, which is not necessarily anti-Islamic, but trying to establish that the public sphere in Israel is Jewish and not otherwise, and trying to minimize interference with its Jewish character.”

Stern compared the bill with a recent ruling of the Court of Justice of the European Union, which decided that a private business in Belgium had the right to dismiss a Muslim woman because her hijab, or headscarf, violated the business’s ban on religious garb in the workplace. The Luxembourg-based court ruled that the move was not discriminatory.

In Israel, there are customary restrictions in force that show deference to observant Jews. Roads through ultra-Orthodox neighborhoods in Jerusalem are closed on the sabbath, and on Yom Kippur—the Day of Atonement, the holiest day of the Jewish calendar—traffic across the country comes to a halt.

The bill to silence the call to prayer has drawn condemnation from Jordan and the Palestinian Authority and still needs to pass three more votes in the Knesset to become law. But for the men gathered for mosque prayer in Ramla, it remains a threat to long-standing practice.

“The bill is unnecessary. We’ve been living in a mixed city for decades with everyone respecting the rites of the other,” said Suleiman Abu Swis, imam of the mosque. “This has been part of the prayer service for 1,400 years, five times a day all over the world.”

Abu Swis said that noise-level problems had been resolved quietly with city officials. “If there is a will, there can be coexistence,” he said, noting that Arabs in Ramla refrain from using their cars on Yom Kippur.

Sitting in his grocery store nearby, Shlomo Houtta, a Jew of Moroccan origin, says he enjoys the melodies of the recitation of the Qur’an, but mosque speakers appear to have been turned up of late as a show of religious assertion.

“There’s religious extremism on both sides, and I think it’s being done to annoy us,” he said. “I don’t mind if it’s at a reasonable volume.”

Badri Yosfan, a Jewish immigrant from Iraq, said the predawn call to prayer sometimes interrupts the sleep of his grandchildren, though it does not disturb him during the day.

Emerging after prayers at the mosque, Musa Abu Hilwa says that every house of prayer has its cacophony of sounds.

“The Christians have their church bells,” he said. “Everyone should respect the other’s freedom of religion.”

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