



**Knesset**

**Research and  
Information Center**

**Arameans in the Middle East and  
Israel: Historical Background,  
Modern National Identity, and  
Government Policy**

**The Knesset, Research  
and Information  
Center**

**Kiryat Ben-Gurion,  
Jerusalem 91950**

**Tel: 02-6408240/1**

**Fax: 02-6496103**

**[www.knesset.gov.il/mmm](http://www.knesset.gov.il/mmm)**

**Written by: Eti Weissblei**

7 Nissan 5777

Approved by: Yuval Vurgan, Team Leader

3 April 2017

Language editing: Knesset Record



Knesset

Research and Information Center

## Summary

The term "Arameans" describes some of the Christian ethnic groups in the Middle East — in Israel, Lebanon, Syria, Turkey and Iraq—who ascribe their origin to the Aramean peoples that lived in the Fertile Crescent from the Biblical period until the first few centuries CE. Israel is home to some 170,000 Christians, of whom 134,000 are registered as having Arab nationality. On September 2014, then-Minister of Interior MK Gideon Sa'ar issued a directive allowing Israeli Christians who are registered in the Population Registry as having Arab nationality to change their nationality to "Aramean." In August 2016, a bill was brought before the Twentieth Knesset to help residents interested in carrying out this change conduct the required procedures. The bill passed in a preliminary reading in the Knesset plenum on 18 January 2017.

Against this backdrop, MK Haim Jelin asked the Knesset Research and Information Center to provide information about the modern Arameans and about the registration of people with Aramean nationality in the Population Registry. This document will address the following subject: the identity and history of modern-day Arameans, the links between Arameans and Israel during the Biblical period and in modern times, and Government policy towards Arameans in Israel—including the registration of Aramean nationality in the Population Registry.

Below are some of the main findings of this document:

- ❖ The Arameans were one of the Semitic peoples that lived in the Fertile Crescent of the Western and Northern Levant—the area of modern-day Israel, northwestern Jordan, Lebanon, western and northwestern Syria, and northern Iraq—and along the Euphrates River. These peoples were at the peak of their historical importance from the end of the second millennium through the beginning of the first millennium BCE, when they established kingdoms and principalities across Mesopotamia, Syria, and the northwestern border of the Land of Israel. During the second half of the 8<sup>th</sup> century BCE, the Aramean kingdoms in Syria fell to the Assyrian Empire one after another, and many of the residents were exiled to other regions of the Assyrian Empire. The Arameans subsequently assumed an important position in the Assyrian government and trade, and Aramaic became the empire's administrative language and the most widespread language of the peoples who lived within its boundaries. The Aramaic language maintained its status under the Babylonian and Persian empires, who ruled the area in the ensuing centuries. In the early days of Christianity and in the first few centuries CE, Aramaic was the most common language in vast stretches of Middle East, including the Land of Israel.

- ❖ The Arameans maintained extensive ties with the Jewish people in ancient times. The Biblical traditions teach that the Arameans and the Hebrew Patriarchs have shared origins and that marriage ties existed between the peoples. The Aramean kingdoms in Syria and northern Israel developed simultaneously to the rise of the biblical Kingdom of Israel. The Bible teaches about ongoing rivalries between the Kingdom of Israel and the neighboring Aramean kingdoms, but also about close relations between them, including family and trade ties. According to the archeological evidence, during the Biblical period, northern Israel and southern Syria constituted a single geographic unit where different ethnic groups—including the Israelites and Arameans—coexisted and melded. Control over the settlements in this area changed periodically due to frequent wars between the peoples, and the residents were therefore exposed to multiple cultural and religious influences.
- ❖ The churches whose origin can be ascribed to the Arameans arose in the Aramaic-speaking territories of the Byzantine Empire, which controlled the area beginning in the fourth century. The members of this minority include adherents belonging to seven Christian churches: five Syriac churches—Maronite Church, Syriac Orthodox Church (also known as Jacobite Church), Syriac-Catholic Church, Church of the East (also known as the Assyrian Church or the Nestorian Church), and the Chaldean Church—and two Melkite Churches—the Greek Orthodox Church and the Greek Catholic Church. We emphasize that the Aramean national identity has not been adopted by the establishment of any of these churches, though some of the adherents perceive themselves as members of the Aramean nation. There are also disagreements on this issue among the believers within each church. We note that each of these churches has a different church apparatus, and the churches differ one from another in their religious affiliation and in their principles of faith and religious ritual. Nonetheless, they share several characteristics, the main one being the use of Aramaic as a language of conversation or prayer (often alongside other languages, Arabic and Greek), whether today or in the past.
- ❖ In 2015, these churches numbered 5.4–8.9 million adherents worldwide, whose origins may be attributed to the Arameans. Of these, 2–3.3 million live in the Middle East, where they compose slightly less than 30% of the Christians in the region.
- ❖ The Syriac churches share a linguistic and cultural tradition that is based on the Aramaic language. They maintained their unique religious and linguistic traits in the years following the Arab conquest of the entire area, which led most of the population to convert to Islam. During the next few centuries, under the Arabs and the Muslim Mameluke and Ottoman Empires, the Christian churches in the Middle East had an

autonomous status allowing them to run their internal affairs independently. The relative stability that allowed the Christians to remain in the same regions and communities for the subsequent centuries and to enjoy times of well-being and prosperity despite being a minority ended during the last decades of Ottoman rule. During World War I, the Christians of Anatolia and Iraq suffered from massacres and mass expulsion, which led members of Syriac Christian churches to flee those areas. Over the ensuing century, due to the various political disputes in the Middle East, Christian emigration from the Middle East increased. Recently, the Syrian civil war and the rise of ISIS in Syria and Iraq have severely harmed the local Christian population, including the Syriac churches.

- ❖ Until the 19th century, the main component of the identity of Middle Eastern Christians was their religion—a Christian minority in a large Muslim population. The geopolitical changes that occurred in the Middle East in the 20th century led to a search for identity and change within this population. The main factor in this process was the fact that many Christians emigrated from the Middle East, which forced them to redefine their identity—not on the basis of religion—in order to maintain the unique aspects of their identity and distinguish themselves from other Christian churches in western countries. The need for an alternative basis for their ethnic identity led Christians to the ancient kingdoms that ruled the Fertile Crescent in the centuries before those churches arose—including the Aramean kingdoms. Those who identify the Syriac Christian churches with the Aramean people emphasize the Aramaic language as the factor that links and unites the churches, the modern Aramean nation, and the ancient Aramean kingdoms. However, other groups in the Christian Syriac churches identify these adherents with the Assyrian people. This issue has led to a serious dispute and lively debate—both between the groups within the Syriac churches that have adopted different national identities and among those who oppose a shared ethnic and national identity for the adherents of the different Syriac churches.
- ❖ In general, the Christians of the Middle East have adopted the national identity of the various countries in which they settled while emphasizing the national rather than the religious elements of their national identity, such as native language and shared history. In practice, this varies from country to country, and it depends on the political, religious, and ethnic constellation and on the nature of the local regime.
- ❖ In the years before Israel gained independence and during the first few years of its existence, contact existed between representatives of the Maronite ethnic group—which, as mentioned before, is one of the Syriac churches—and the Jewish Agency, and later with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. This due to a perception that saw

closeness between Maronite Christians and Jews as two national minorities based on the view that the two peoples aspire for independence and are interested in an "alliance of minorities." However, although some Maronite figures spoke out in favor of the Zionist idea during the 1930s and 1940s, the contacts did not lead to real cooperation between the State of Israel and the Maronite Church in Lebanon.

- ❖ According to data from the Central Bureau of Statistics (CBS), in 2016, Israel was home to some 170,000 Christians, who compose some 2% of the population. The CBS defines 78.9% of the Christians in Israel, some 134,000 people, as Christian Arabs. Israeli Christians are divided into different churches, each of which constitutes a community or an ethnic group with an independent hierarchy, and unique traditions, prayer language, rituals, and prayer texts. No authority in Israel maintains complete and accurate data about the number of Christians in Israel divided into ethnic groups and Christian churches. According to estimates, some 42% of the Christians in Israel are Greek Catholic (Melkites), 32% are Greek Orthodox, 13% are Latin Catholic, 7% are Maronites, and 4.4% are Protestants.
- ❖ Israeli law grants Christians freedom of worship and religion, and it safeguards Christian holy sites in Israel. Recognized Christian groups have authority to manage their members' personal affairs according to the canonic law of each church. The Religious Groups Department in the Ministry of Interior is responsible for all non-Jewish ethnic groups in Israel, including Christians. There was no deliberate policy to cultivate the Christian Arabs as a separate minority distinct from the Muslims, and they were usually included in the same category together with the Muslims. Scholars studying the Christian community in Israel describe it as caught between the Muslim and Jewish societies. This creates an identity crisis among Christian Arabs, who experience an ongoing conflict between the different components of their identity. One of the approaches to address this conflict, which has become more acute following the rise of extremists and Islam within Muslim society in Israel, is attempting to integrate into Israel while emphasizing the shared fate of Jews and Christians, for example, by having Christian youths perform volunteer service in the Israel Defense Forces and the security forces. The question of the national ethnic Aramean identity of Christians in Israel was put on the public agenda within the context of the activity of groups that call for recruiting young Christians to the IDF. At the same time, the Aramaic Maronite Center, which promotes the use of the Aramaic Syriac language among Maronite Christians as a part of strengthening their unique identity, has begun operating.

- ❖ In September 2014, then-Minister of Interior MK Gideon Sa'ar announced that he would allow interested residents to register their nationality in the Population Registry as "Aramean." Prior to the announcement, the Ministry of Interior consulted with three scholars, and based on their opinion the Minister of Interior ruled that "the fact that the Aramean nation exists is evident," and that "the conditions necessary to prove the existence of a nationality exist, including historical heritage, religion, culture, origin, and shared language." In December 2014, the Registration and Passports Section in the Population and Immigration Authority published its guidelines on the subject, according to which people registered as having "Arab" or "Assyrian" nationality and as a member of one of the following Christian groups: Maronite, Eastern Orthodox, Greek Catholic (Melkite), Syrian Catholic and Syrian Orthodox would be eligible to change their registered nationality to Aramean. The change is made by presenting a declaration that one's ancestry is rooted in the Aramean nation, in the case of a registry of a newborn baby, or by presenting a declaratory judgement from a court affirming that the applicant is a member of the Aramean nation.
- ❖ Some 80–90% of the Christian Arab population in Israel—i.e., an estimated 110,000–120,000 people—meet the conditions for changing their registered nationality to Aramean according to the Ministry of Interior guidelines. According to estimates, those who meet the conditions include some 56,000 Greek Catholics, some 43,000 Greek Orthodox, some 9,500 Maronites, and several hundred who are Syrian Orthodox and Syrian Catholic. According to Ministry of Interior data provided to the Knesset Research and Information Center, from January 2014 to February 2017 there were 16 cases of a change of nationality in the Population Registry to "Aramean."
- ❖ As stated above, the process of changing one's nationality to "Aramean" requires a declaratory judgement from a district court affirming that the applicant is of Aramean nationality. The cost of submitting this request to the district court is NIS 1,140. In August 2016, a bill seeking to ease the process of changing nationality details in the Population Registry was submitted to the Knesset. The Ministerial Committee for Legislation decided to endorse the bill in its preliminary reading, while making administrative arrangements on this subject with the Ministry of Interior, the Ministry of Finance, and the Ministry of Justice. On 18 January 2017, the bill passed in the plenum of the 18th Knesset in a preliminary reading. In accordance with the decision, the Ministry of Justice and the Ministry of Interior are working to change the regulations governing court fees, so that applicants asking for a declaratory judgement regarding their Aramean nationality will be exempted from paying. A proposal to amend the regulations has been brought before the Knesset Constitution, Law and

Justice Committee, and it is scheduled to be discussed in the near future. When the regulations are approved, a special form will be issued to be used for requesting a declaratory judgement on this matter.