



June 26, 2017

Background: Proposed Israeli Conversion Law

Overview

On Sunday, June 26, 2017, the Israeli Ministerial Committee for Legislation approved a bill submitted by Interior Minister Aryeh Deri, leader of the ultra-Orthodox Shas party, that would require the State to recognize only conversions to Judaism implemented under the supervision of Israel's Chief Rabbinate. The bill was supported by a majority of the members of the Ministerial Committee for Legislation. Defense Minister Avigdor Lieberman and Immigration Absorption Minister Sofa Landver, both of the Yisrael Beiteinu party, opposed the bill and formally appealed the decision. The full cabinet must now vote to approve or reject the bill before it is submitted for consideration in the Knesset.

Circumventing the May 2016 Supreme Court Ruling

- The bill aims to circumvent a March 2016 Supreme Court ruling that permitted those who underwent private Orthodox conversions in Israel to become citizens under the Law of Return. The bill would grant the Chief Rabbinate direct supervision over conversion, an authority that it does not hold today.
- In 2005, the Reform and Conservative movements in Israel petitioned the court for the same recognition of their private conversions conducted in Israel; Israel currently recognizes non-Orthodox conversions performed abroad for the purpose of Jewish immigration. The proposed law seeks to prevent non-Orthodox conversions performed in Israel from being recognized for immigration and remove the recourse of pursuing such issues through the Israeli courts.
- The bill would also negate private Orthodox conversions such as those of the Giyur Kahalacha private rabbinical courts, which were established two years ago to help the 364,000 Israelis who immigrated to Israel from the former Soviet Union but are not recognized as Jewish by the Rabbinate.

Upending the Status Quo

- The bill will revoke the de facto state recognition of Orthodox conversions through independent Orthodox rabbinical courts and the right of Reform and Conservative converts in Israel to register as Jewish in the Interior Ministry.
- Today in Israel, anyone may perform a conversion and the courts may accept that those conversions were performed by a recognized Jewish community. The bill aims to anchor the entrance to joining the Jewish People solely through the Orthodox Chief Rabbinate. The State conversion system, established following the Ne'eman Committee agreements in 1997, was based on the mutual understanding between the different streams of Judaism that they must work together to find solutions for conversion. The agreements were purposely not anchored in law in order to avoid defining proper Jewish conversion.
- The bill will revoke public funding for Reform and Conservative conversion classes.

- The bill will impact pending religion and state matters in the Supreme Court, such as the types of Jewish conversion that may be recognized for the purposes of adoption.
- The bill seeks to prevent any potential future conversion solution that may solve difficulties faced by tens of thousands of immigrants. Today, independent conversion courts may be recognized in civil courts. The proposed law seeks to prevent recognition of conversions for both civil and religious purposes.
- The new law will retroactively legitimize the Interior Ministry's "closed door policy" toward non-Israeli citizens interested in conversion through private conversion courts in Israel. The policy, never enshrined in law, was deemed illegal by the Supreme Court. The new law will create a new status quo.
- The approval of the bill violates the 2015 coalition agreement to preserve the status quo on matters of religion and state.

Implications for the Jewish People around the World

- The bill creates uncertainty regarding the future recognition of both Orthodox and non-Orthodox conversions to Judaism that were conducted outside Israel.
- The law may open the way for the State to recognize only conversions carried out abroad that are approved by Israel's Chief Rabbinate. By placing the Israeli Chief Rabbinate and the State conversion system as the ultimate authority on conversions within Israel, Israeli legislators may seek to create a unified policy regarding all conversions including this abroad.