

RELEASE IN PART
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To: H
Subject: FW: Segregation and Harassment of Women Increases in Israel as Ultra-Orthodox Community Moves into Secular Cities
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From: Lurie, Mike D
Sent: Wednesday, December 28, 2011 7:30 AM
To: NEA-Staff-Assistants-DL; NEA-IPA-DL; NEA-SEMEP-DL; SGWI; DRL-NESCA-DL; Lillis, Amy J; Renner, Erin B; Toiv, Nora F; 'rwaller [redacted]; 'ssimon [redacted]; 'jfiner [redacted]
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Subject: FW: Segregation and Harassment of Women Increases in Israel as Ultra-Orthodox Community Moves into Secular Cities

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Subject: Segregation and Harassment of Women Increases in Israel as Ultra-Orthodox Community Moves into Secular Cities

1. (SBU) Summary and Comment: Two recent incidents have highlighted a public debate on women's rights in Israel. In one case, a religious women named Tanya Rosenblit refused to move to the back of a public bus from Ashdod to Jerusalem. In another case, media reported on an extremist group of ultra-Orthodox who spit on and cursed at eight-year-old AmCit Naama Margolese in the town of Beit Shemesh, apparently because she was wearing "immodest" clothes. In response, PM Netanyahu spoke against segregation and harassment of women at recent Cabinet meetings, and appointed an inter-ministerial team to examine the recent incidents and submit recommendations within 60

days. A protest against segregation of women in Beit Shemesh attracted 3,000-4,000 people December 27, including Leader of the Opposition Tzippi Livni and several other Knesset members.

2. (SBU) Some political pundits and opponents, including Livni, are casting this issue as part of a wider "culture war" against religious-backed elements who are demanding gender segregation in public spaces. But this debate is also reflective of a struggle within the wider Israeli Orthodox Jewish sector, between mainstream modern Orthodox and ultra-Orthodox Jews (also called "Haredim") on one hand, and small groups of zealots. As ultra-Orthodox families move to predominantly secular Jewish cities like Ashdod and Beit Shemesh from traditional Haredi neighborhoods, they seek to "sanctify" their new communities, including in the public square. Spitting on young girls for wearing "immodest clothing" is an extreme phenomenon that draws nearly universal condemnation within the ultra-Orthodox community. But many Haredim, and also some modern Orthodox, support calls for greater gender separation in public spaces. The Israeli Supreme Court has already ruled to forbid forced gender segregation on public buses – and the government has stated its intention to enforce this ruling and related laws. End Summary and Comment.

Case One: The "Rosa Parks of Israel"

3. (SBU) On December 16, Ashdod resident Tanya Rosenblit boarded a bus headed for Jerusalem. She was the first passenger that morning so she sat behind the driver. As ultra-Orthodox male passengers boarded the bus they demanded that she sit in the back of the bus as is common on that route which connects a religious neighborhood in Ashdod with one in Jerusalem. She refused to move, even after the driver and a policeman intervened and asked her to move to the back (see <http://www.ynetnews.com/articles/0,7340,L-4163399,00.html> for Rosenblit's account of the incident.) Newspapers and social media sites dubbed Rosenblit the "Rosa Parks of Israel." Israeli officials were quick to denounce the incident. At the December 18 Cabinet meeting, PM Netanyahu said "Today I heard about a case of moving a woman on a bus. I strongly oppose this. I think that marginal groups cannot be allowed to dismantle our common denominator and we must maintain the public space as an open and safe for all Israelis."

4. (SBU) On January 7, 2011 the Supreme Court ruled that gender segregation on public buses could not be imposed or ordered, but could occur only on a voluntary basis. The NGO Israel Religious Action Center (IRAC), told us that they have received several outside complaints since the Supreme Court ruling and that their staff has also been harassed and asked to sit in the back of buses on undercover rides to investigate the incidence of segregation. IRAC filed a petition to the Supreme Court in 2007 against the practice of segregation and "modesty" rules (e.g., long skirts, no pants, covered sleeves and collar bones) on separate buses known as "mehadrin" lines operated by the Israeli public bus company, Egged. Transportation Minister Yisrael Katz (Likud) submitted a recommendation to the Supreme Court in 2010 that "mehadrin lines" be allowed to operate on a voluntary basis. He suggested that buses should be allowed to put up "signs that provide an explanation and a request from the passengers to sit separately – while stressing that there is no obligation to do so." In its ruling, the Supreme Court declared that "A public transportation operator, like any other person, does not have the right to order, request or tell women where they may sit simply because they are women...they must sit wherever they like."

Case Two: Report of Spitting at Eight-Year-Old Girl

5. (SBU) On the heels of public outcry over segregation on public buses, Channel 2 aired a video report December 23 that included an interview of Naama Margoless, an 8-year-old Amicit girl from a modern orthodox (or "national religious") family in Beit Shemesh who was allegedly spit on and cursed at on her way to school (see <http://972mag.com/watch-ultra-orthodox-spit-on-immodest-8-year-old-girl-in-bet-shemesh/31268/> for full video and English subtitles). PM Netanyahu was once again quick to condemn the harassment. At the December 25 Cabinet meeting, PM Netanyahu stated that "In liberal, western democracies the public space is open and secure for everyone - men and women alike. There is no place here for any harassment or discrimination." He instructed Attorney General Yehuda Weinstein to determine whether the laws against segregation of women were being enforced by municipalities and to examine whether signs in streets instructing women to use the other side of the street were legal. He also appointed an inter-ministerial team to examine the recent incidents and submit recommendations within 60 days, including sanctions on municipalities where such segregation occurs. After the Beit Shemesh municipality announced

December 26 they would install 300-400 cameras to monitor harassment of women, there were reports of riots and one police officer sustained mild injuries after he was hit by a stone.

Beit Shemesh Center in Eye of Storm

6. (SBU) A Beit Shemesh contact who is a neighbor of the Margolese family told us that the problem of segregation has existed for a number of years and neither the municipality nor the police have done anything about it. He estimated that there are a group of about 50 men who fall into the zealot category of spitting at women and girls, but that no one appears ready to stop them. Recent efforts to take down segregation signs on public streets have largely failed, as new ones are put up or spray painted to replace the old ones. He was not hopeful that anything would change. A Haredi advisor to the IDF, GOI and city of Beit Shemesh also told us that the number of zealots was small, but estimated that up to 25 percent of the ultra-Orthodox community in Beit Shemesh passively supported them. He said that these zealots do not require rabbinical acceptance and that they are unlikely to compromise, especially in light of media attention. A protest in Beit Shemesh December 27 against segregation attracted 3000-4000 people, including MKs Tzippi Livni and Shelly Yacimovich. Reacting to the protest, on December 27, PM Netanyahu said at the opening of the country's annual Bible Quiz that "We have recently witnessed an unacceptable phenomenon of the exclusion of women from the public domain, which contradicts the spirit of the Biblical tradition and contradicts the values of Judaism, since it is said 'love thy neighbor.'"

Comment – Pressures On the Ultra-Orthodox Leadership to Speak Out Against Zealots

7. (SBU) The Haredi leadership has strongly condemned the Beit Shemesh spitting incident, but is largely defensive of gender segregation. Both Minister of Interior Eli Yishai (chairman of the religiously oriented SHAS political party) and leading Ashkenazi Rabbi Shalom Elyashiv have called on followers to boycott GOI programs set up for ultra-Orthodox in national and military service in protest of what they view as an unfair, sweeping attack against the sector. However, despite public defensiveness, an internal debate within the religious community is slowly brewing, and some are calling for more forthright community actions against zealots. SHAS rebel MK Haim Amsellem has publicly visited the Margolese family and spoken out against the zealots. One columnist in the Haredi on-line newspaper Kikar HaShabbat stated in a December 27 op-ed, "When all the other bus-passengers in the ultra-Orthodox neighborhoods in Jerusalem run away from a group of rioters who expel women in disgrace and remain silent, can someone still be surprised why the Prime Minister, and even the U.S. Secretary of State think that this topic has transgressed all possible borders?"

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