

Hundreds of US rabbis vow to block far-right Israel lawmakers from their communities

Reform, Conservative, Reconstructionist leaders sign letter pledging to not allow some of Netanyahu's coalition partners from speaking in their synagogues

By RON KAMPEAS 23 December 2022, 6:27 am

JTA — More than 330 American rabbis, including some who occupy prominent roles in major cities, are pledging to block far-right members of Benjamin Netanyahu's incoming government from speaking at their synagogues and will lobby to keep them from speaking in their communities.

An open letter said they will not invite members of the far-right parties "to speak at our congregations and organizations. We will speak out against their participation in other fora across our communities. We will encourage the boards of our congregations and organizations to join us in this protest as a demonstration of our commitment to our Jewish and democratic values."

Netanyahu announced his new government including the far-right Religious Zionism, Otzma Yehudit and Noam factions late Wednesday, although he has yet to finalize coalition agreements with his political partners.

Israeli government ministers sometimes speak at American synagogues to drum up support for their initiatives and ideas. It's not clear if figures who are harshly critical of non-Orthodox Jews, as the far-right lawmakers have been, would accept invitations from their synagogues even if offered.

Nevertheless, the letter's uncompromising tone and the breadth of the signatories is a signal of a burgeoning crisis in relations between Israel and the US Jewish community triggered by the elevation of the far-right parties.

The letter was directed at Religious Zionism, which won 14 seats in the November 1 election running on a joint slate with the Otzma Yehudit and Noam. The three factions split apart again after the election and are now holding separate coalition negotiations. The rabbis' letter appeared to be intended for all three parties.

Its signatories come from the Reform, Conservative and Reconstructionist movements. There were no Orthodox signatories.

Among the signatories were current and former members of the boards of rabbis in Chicago and Los Angeles; rabbis who lead the largest Conservative and Reform congregations in the Washington, DC, area; former leaders of major Reform and Conservative movement bodies; the current leader of the Reconstructionist movement; and the rector of the Conservative movement's Los Angeles-based American Jewish University.

The letter was organized by David Teutsch, a leading Reconstructionist rabbi in Philadelphia, and John Rosove, the rabbi emeritus of Temple Israel in Los Angeles.

The letter outlined five Religious Zionism proposals that it said "will cause irreparable harm to the Israel-Jewish Diaspora relationship": narrowing the Law of Return; eroding LGBTQ rights; allowing the Knesset to override Supreme Court rulings; annexing parts of the West Bank; and expelling "disloyal" Arab citizens.

The proposals, and other contentious legislation, have been spearheaded by Religious Zionism leader Bezalel Smotrich, Otzma Yehudit's Itamar Ben Gvir and Noam's Avi Maoz, along with Netanyahu's ultra-Orthodox allies in the Shas and

United Torah Judaism parties and the incoming prime minister's Likud. The five parties make up Netanyahu's 64-seat majority bloc in the 120-seat Knesset. How much of that agenda will make its way into governance remains to be seen. Netanyahu has said he is confident that he will be able to constrain some of the figures he plans to name to lead ministries.

A number of US Jewish groups spoke out against including the far-right faction in the government while Netanyahu was negotiating with the factions, and more have done so since he announced the government's formation on Wednesday. They include the Anti-Defamation League, the major non-Orthodox movements, and the liberal Jewish Middle East policy groups Partners for Progressive Israel, J Street and Americans for Peace Now.

Abe Foxman, the retired director of the ADL and a longtime bellwether of establishment Jewish support for Israel, said earlier this month that he was hopeful Netanyahu can contain the far-right, but that "if Israel ceases to be an open democracy, I won't be able to support it."

Some organizations that spoke out in 2019 when Netanyahu considered a coalition with extremists were silent even as others sounded the alarm since the election, including the American Israel Public Affairs Committee and the Conference of Presidents of Major American Jewish Organizations.

An AIPAC statement after Netanyahu's Wednesday announcement said, "Once again, the Jewish state has demonstrated that it is a robust democracy with the freedoms that Americans also cherish." The Conference of Presidents has not issued a statement.

Most Orthodox groups have yet to pronounce on the new government. The Zionist Organization of America, which backs settlement building, has indicated it will support the new government.

The American Jewish Committee shifted its tone slightly from before the election, when it declined to speak out. In a statement after Netanyahu's announcement, it sounded a note similar to Foxman's, saying it would work with Netanyahu "to help ensure that the inflammatory rhetoric that has been employed by some members of the governing coalition — rhetoric unrepresentative of Israel's democratic values, its role as a homeland for all Jews, and its unwavering quest for peace — will not define the domestic and foreign policies of the new government."

The Biden administration has said that it will judge Israel's government by its policies, not the individuals in Netanyahu's coalition.