



Israel risks alienating Jewish diaspora over definition of a Jew

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Israel has been warned it risks alienating the Jewish diaspora with controversial proposals to redefine who has the right to be called a Jew Photo: ALAMY

The row has left Benjamin Netanyahu, the Israeli prime minister, as an unwilling arbitrator in a stand-off of potentially historic proportions between American Jewish leaders and senior figures in his own coalition.

There are growing fears that the dispute could lead to a major schism in world Jewry and the prime minister is facing a choice between further isolating his country or the possible collapse of his government. Mr Netanyahu said this week that the proposed law could “tear apart the Jewish

people”. He has received tens of thousands of emails of protest from American Jews, who have been urged to contact him by their rabbis.

At the heart of the controversy is the age-old question of identity and the growing influence of ultra-orthodox rabbis in Israel, whose views on the subject are often seen as doctrinaire by Jews outside the country.

Matters came to a head earlier this month when a committee in the Knesset, Israel’s parliament, narrowly approved legislation that could result in many foreign Jews being denied the right to settle in Israel. The so-called “conversion bill”, which still has to be passed by a full session of the Knesset before it becomes law, has caused fury in the United States.

Since the collapse of the Soviet Union, a million Russian-speaking immigrants have moved to Israel. But, because they either had only a Jewish father or married into the faith, almost 350,000 of them are not recognised as Jews in their adopted homeland. That includes 90,000 who were born in Israel.

According to Orthodox doctrine, only those whose mothers are Jewish can be officially classed as Jews.

Rectifying this anomaly is vital to the future of Israel, according to Danny Ayalon, the deputy foreign minister and a senior figure in the Yisrael Beiteinu party, whose core constituency is Russian-speaking. “The 350,000 immigrants who are not considered Jews are a national strategic problem that must be solved now, because in another generation or two it could tear our society apart,” he said.

Yisrael Beiteinu’s original proposals were designed to make it easier for Russian-speakers to become Jewish by allowing a sympathetic local rabbi to convert them. But to have any hope of forcing the bill through the Knesset, it had to make a major concession to religious parties by proposing that the ultra-Orthodox rabbinate would have ultimate authority on conversions.

The bill prompted a storm of protest in the US, where more than 80 per cent of Jews are non-Orthodox. American Jewish leaders fear that the bill could mean conversions performed by American rabbis are not recognised in Israel – meaning that new converts might not be allowed to live in the country.

Rabbi Shlomo Amar, the chief Sephardic rabbi of Israel, told the New York Times that Mr Netanyahu had told him that the controversy over the conversion bill was threatening to alienate American Jews, whose support he needed in his negotiations with President Barack Obama over peace with the Palestinians.

Natan Sharansky, the former Soviet dissident who is now the powerful chairman of Israel’s Jewish Agency, warned that many foreign Jews could end up feeling like second-class members of the faith.

Unable to forge a compromise, Mr Netanyahu this week succeeded in having a Knesset debate on the conversion legislation delayed for six months. on the conversion legislation delayed for six months.