Let Soviet Jews Come To America

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Another wrinkle is creeping into the fabric of Middle East diplomacy. The search for ways to reconcile U.S. and Israeli policy toward settlements in the occupied territories with loan guarantees to help Israel absorb immigrants from the former ***Soviet*** Union has revived an old question. Should the United States itself accept a larger number of emigrants who might otherwise go to Israel?

The question arises in part from the need to interpret U.S. immigration statutes in light of the ***Soviet*** Union's breakup. The INS indicates that the statutory ceiling on immigration from the ***Soviet*** Union, roughly 25,000 a year, applies separately to each of the states emerging from the union's breakup. That means that, beyond the 61,000 refugees from those countries already authorized for the current fiscal year, tens of thousands of additional emigrants may be eligible to apply for entry into the United States.

With numbers like that, the United States could be accessible to many emigres who would otherwise head for Israel. That is especially true for the better educated and more productive emigrants, for the law provides priority allocations for preferred professions. Not incidentally, those individuals could include scientists and engineers from the ***Soviet*** military-industrial complex whom the West hopes to prevent serving the nuclear ambitions of other countries.

Couple that startling increase in immigration slots with the precipitous downturn in actual immigration to Israel from the former ***Soviet*** Union. Fewer than 5,000 arrived last month, less than half the number ***coming*** a year ago. Several factors account for this. An unemployment rate of 38 percent among recent immigrants and hard-luck stories filtering back to Russia do not encourage others to ***come***. Particularly when there are flickers of hope that liberty and prosperity may yet be achievable in the post-***Soviet*** non-union, there are fewer incentives to move to a distant danger zone.

These considerations bear on the moral, economic and political aspects of the current U.S.-Israel impasse. There has been much unease, not least in the Jewish community, over a policy that in effect steers emigres toward a war-prone Middle East rather than allowing more of them an ***American*** option. Why should those who prefer the United States be denied that choice in order to accommodate Israel's ambition to attract them to a Jewish homeland?

The ethics of the point are perplexing. Some Israeli officials argue that the United States is exploiting the immigration issue to impose its will on the peace process. That gets things backward. It is Israeli policy that is exploiting emigres, directly or indirectly, to perpetuate the occupation of territories that are essential topics in the peace negotiations. Elements in the Israeli regime are quite ready to place the immigrants in harm's way, and it is rather disingenuous to say that few of them actually reside in the occupied areas. By overloading an already strained housing supply, the newcomers face pressures to settle amid the violence of the West Bank or displace other Israeli citizens who will do so.

Much evidence indicates that, given a choice, a large number of those emigrants would ***come*** into the United States. That is not surprising. Most of them are secular in orientation with little religious conviction to compel their movement to the land of Zion. Apart from ***America***'s historical appeal as a land of opportunity, the U.S. Jewish community is larger and more affluent than the population of Israel. In cultural and economic terms, the United States has far greater resources to absorb the emigrant surge.

But the economic implications are more far-reaching. If fewer emigrants go to Israel, there will be substantially less justification for the proposed $ 10 billion in loan guarantees to assist their absorption there. Furthermore, an increased flow of immigrants to ***America*** is bound to affect the level of philanthropic assistance to Israel. Private contributions will be needed to resettle immigrants here.

This argument develops against a backdrop of shifting opinion in Israel. Writing for the New Republic from Tel Aviv, Hillel Halkin calls into doubt the policy of maximizing immigration: "If it's a question of utility, the country can profit from ***Soviet*** Jewish professionals, but only so many; if it's one of rescuing ***Jews***, few ***Jews*** in the ***Soviet*** Union today are gravely threatened." Thus, there is not the sense of urgency that once attended the problem of emigration.

Politically, these considerations spell leverage for Secretary of State James Baker's effort to persuade the Israelis to be more forthcoming in the peace process. Baker has articulated an ***American*** consensus: "Yes" to generous help for Israel, "no" to subsidizing the permanent occupation of contested territories. The latitude to admit more of those fleeing the former ***Soviet*** Union offers powerful reinforcement to Baker's diplomacy.

This prospect will be unwelcome to the regime of Yitzhak Shamir, ideologically committed to the goal of a Greater Israel and determined to attract as many immigrants as possible. The issue now confronting Shamir is stark: Either find a path to compromise or risk the loss of U.S. loan guarantees -- and of the dwindling stream of immigrants from Russia and its neighbors.

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