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BEHIND THE NEWS

Soviet Jewish immigrants pull Israel to the right politically

By Mark Bruzonsky

WASHINGTON, D.C. — While Palestinians are experiencing heightened confusion and depression watching events unfold in the Gulf, they still nevertheless cling to every possible scrap of hope wanting to convince themselves that their cause is not doomed.

Palestinian intellectuals are now busying themselves making analogies between the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait and the Israeli occupation of themselves — analogies which clearly are faulty, incomplete, unclear, but still analogies which offer some kind of hope. Why, Palestinians repeatedly ask, is the U.S. responding to the occupation of Kuwait in one way and to their own plight in another?

But while the intellectuals are preoccupied with such slogans and arguments, the realities of the situation are such that the Palestinians are being slowly but continually crushed while the Israelis are constantly pushing forward.

I wrote about this ominous reality last week in my column titled "Saturday Night Fever — Jerusalem Style."

But even as I wrote the situation was deteriorating further and becoming even more dangerous as the escalating influx of Soviet Jews not only threatens to change the demographic realities between Israel and the Palestinians — especially in the Jerusalem area — but also is changing the political makeup. Within a few years there may be more than another million Jewish immigrants in the Holy Land — nearly all of them Soviet Jews. And meanwhile Jewish intellectuals — especially the best educated, those who have the most options, and in general those who are most interested in a "just" settlement with the Palestinians — are leaving Israel for the U.S. and Europe at an escalating pace.

So while the world's focus is on the Gulf and the likelihood of a historic battle that is taking on some characteristics of an Arab civil war, the situation between Israel and the Palestinians continues to deteriorate and may be reaching a point of no return.

Recently the popular Palestinian Arabic weekly published in Jerusalem, Al-Bayader Assisavi, commissioned an opinion poll of Soviet Jewish immigrants. What it revealed is most disturbing.

Some 73 percent of recent Soviet Jewish immigrants indicated that when they first get a chance they will vote for right-wing Israeli parties. Indeed, they seem to have a tendency to vote for parties even to the extremist right of Likud.

About 10 percent support Rabbi Meir Kahane's racist Kach party which is purposefully very active in building support among the newcomers. Another 20% indicate their general support for other extremist parties advocating intransigent policies toward the Palestinians.

To date, less than a hundred thousand Soviet Jews have come to Israel. In previous years, of course, the great majority of departing Soviet Jews preferred not to come to Israel in the first place.

But during the past two years the situation has changed, the gates of the U.S. have closed, and now the great majority of Soviet Jews find that they have no other choice but to go to Israel.

According to Al-Bayader Assisavi, if elections were held in Israel today the influence of Soviet Jews would be to add another 4 right-wing members to the Israeli Knesset. This in itself would make it likely that the Likud would not only keep power but more and more depend for its rule on parties even more extreme than itself.

Quite obviously then, if the situation continues to evolve in this way, in a few years the influence of Soviet Jewish immigration on Israeli politics will be a major swing toward even further extremist nationalist politics.

In the recent opinion poll — which was conducted by Jewish researchers from the Hebrew University in Jerusalem and covered a total of 1105 Soviet Jews of all

ages — seven questions were asked. Here are the highlights:

What are the motives for your emigration?

The reasons were multiple in most cases resulting in the following answers: 48% indicated Zionist ideology, 25% family relations, 83% instability in the USSR and 77% fear of anti-Semitism.

Which party would you vote for?

Right-Wing:

Likud: 53%
Tehiya: 11%
Kach: 9%
Moleket: 8%

Left-Wing:

Labor: 15%
Agudat Yisrael: 1%
Liberals: 1%
Shinui: 1%

And when asked if they were "right", "left", or "center", 61% said "right", 12% said "left", and 27% said "center".

Are you ready to give up the Occupied Territories?

Opposed to all concessions: 58%
Return part of territories for peace: 16%
Return all of territories for peace: 7%
No opinion: 18%

What kind of solution do you want for the Palestinians?

Annexation of territory without the Palestinians: 21%
"Transfer" of Palestinians out of the territories: 18%
Annexation of both land and people: 18%
Maintain the status quo: 11%
Establish a Palestinian state: 7%
Other solutions: 4%
No opinion: 21%

Are you ready to settle in the territories?

Those willing to settle now: 19%
Those willing to settle if given privileges: 16%
Not prepared to settle: 42%
No opinion: 23%

Which country would you have preferred to go to?

USA: 17%
Canada: 9%
Australia: 12%
Europe: 13%
Others: 18%
No opinion: 30%

How do you see the future of Jerusalem?

United and eternal capital of Israel: 75%
Divided between two states: 8%
Shared by two peoples: 8%
International: 12%
No opinion: 3%

Note: The reason given by the researchers for so many Soviet Jews being in favor of making Jerusalem an "international" city is because Soviets think of such a city as one "exempt from taxes and customs, and this is what the Soviets care about."