

Israel: Visions for Opportunity and Growth

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Throughout history, immigration to Israel has been responsible for the state's growth, development, and vitality. As a result, the relationship between immigrants and Israeli society plays an important role in the characteristics of the state. The challenge that has confronted Israel since 1948 has been how to maintain natural cohesion and unity while absorbing hundreds of thousands of immigrants from differing backgrounds and cultures. Historically, the strong-hand of the state demanded a melting pot approach to absorption in which immigrants from the four corners of the world went through a similar process to create new Israelis.

However, beginning in the 1970s and especially since 1989, Soviet Jewish immigrants integrated into an Israeli system that was distinctly more liberal and less statist than in the past. Israeli society as a whole supported the influx of Soviet immigrants, yet natural tensions were nevertheless apparent. Despite the new immigrants' educational successes and professional aspirations, Israelis expected them to leave their past behind. Facing prejudices and discrimination, the Soviet immigrants began to compete for the best jobs in society. By 1992, the strength of this immigrant group culminated with their participation in voting out of power the Likud government and giving four crucial seats in the Knesset to the Labor government. But what had been perceived as a victory, ended with disappointment when the Labor government, too, did not fulfill the immigrants' expectations.

Yisrael b'Aliya

After years of struggling first for the right to emigrate to Israel, and then for immigrant rights through the established Labor and Likud governments, leaders of the Soviet Jewish community came to the conclusion by 1994 that the environment and circumstances had changed and that the formation of an independent immigrant party was viable. There were two factors that resulted in this change of attitude. First, on the one hand, the immigrants had become disenchanted with both the Labor and Likud establishments and believed that they could not integrate into Israeli society and succeed if those establishments did not change their immigration policies and priorities. Secondly, there had been a sea-change in traditional thinking about absorption, in the sense that many Soviet Jewish leaders now believed that independent political activism would actually help their assimilation into Israeli society, not hinder it.

The formation of the Yisrael b'Aliya party and the concerns and complaints that it poses to Israel's establishment illustrate major problems shared by all Israelis. Issues concerning private initiative, equal treatment, and educational conditions fall in this category. Thus, Yisrael b'Aliya is not a narrow Russian party. Rather, it is a national, reform, and modern Zionist party that advocates equality for olim and all Israeli citizens. Support for this party came from successful immigrants including small businessmen, scientists, and even many American Jewish immigrants who shared its vision.

With this wider agenda in mind, Yisrael b'Aliya is building bridges in Israeli society as a whole. With two orthodox, two traditional, and three secular Jews holding seats in the Knesset---a mix unlike any other party today---it aspires to be a diverse yet harmonious party that can ameliorate religious polarization in Israel. Recognizing that fundamental ideological debates cannot be resolved overnight, Yisrael b'Aliya proposed to deal with urgent issues on a pragmatic, non-confrontational basis. As a result, Yisrael b'Aliya has been resistant to religious coercion in the political sphere and has moved toward practical solutions with the religious establishment. For example, progress has been made concerning the issue of non-Jewish burials in Jewish cemeteries, an especially important issue to Russian immigrants given that nearly 100,000 of the 700,000 are not Jewish. Concerning economic issues, Yisrael b'Aliya has an extremely liberal program, yet it does advocate some necessary government involvement both in providing a social safety net and in promoting high-tech development. The success of the peace process is also important to the members of Yisrael b'Aliya. Ideologically, Yisrael b'Aliya does not preclude a land-for-peace agreement, whether with Syria or with the Palestinians, but it is contingent on maintaining security. For example, Palestinian cities evacuated by Israel should no longer be cities of refuge for terrorists. On the peace front, generally, Yisrael b'Aliya could be considered to the left of Likud, just as it might have been to the right of Labor in a different government.

Economic Reform for Israel's Future

Binyamin Netanyahu's top priority is to bring economic reform to Israel. Through modern and high-tech development, privatization, and free markets, he shares the belief that Israel's economic strength will help it

attract another million Jewish immigrants and achieve peace with its Arab neighbors. His ideas on economic policy and the nature of future negotiations with the Palestinians characterize Prime Minister Netanyahu as a real pragmatist.

The role of minister of trade and industry is at the heart of Israel's economic reform. While government control of the daily lives of businesses will decrease, government support of high-tech industries, small businesses, and scientific development will increase. International free trade is also a priority under this ministry. Included in this push for an expansion of international trade is a focus on three regions: 1) the free world, 2) the Middle East, and 3) Russia and the former Soviet states. With the free world, the free exchange of goods should come with the free exchange of ideas. Both Israel and the United States are pursuing scientific and technological joint ventures in the high-tech field.

Israel's economic involvement in the Middle East must ultimately be characterized by democratization, liberalization, and free borders. Israel should not be bashful about linking democracy and peace after all, a democracy that hates you is preferable to a dictatorship that loves you. Israel should not oppose concessions to Syria in the search for peace, but in return it should seek democratic reforms (like freedom of speech and freedom of the press) which are more important guarantors of peace than early-warning stations on the Golan Heights. Of course, Israel should not wait for full democracies to flourish before it seeks peace; much progress can be made in the meantime.

Economic cooperation with the Palestinian Authority in industrial zones and other areas should and must expand to the benefit of both the Palestinians and the Israelis. Although economic opportunities with Jordan and Egypt are unlimited, they have not been fully exploited. This is due no less to the negative role of Israeli monopolies than due to problems with the Arab side. Jordan, Egypt, and Israel together must overcome the present trade restrictions and bureaucratic obstacles in order to make these economic relationships viable.

Israel must also take advantage of the window of opportunity in Russia and the former Soviet states. Given the special skills and backgrounds of the Soviet immigrants and their remaining contacts in the region, it is to Israel's advantage to exploit these human resources and increase the volume of trade there.

This Special Policy Forum Report was prepared by Rachel Rittberg.