

Soviet Jewish Immigration

The mass influx of Soviet Jews to occupied Palestine became a reality late last year. As of January, immigration reached about 5,000. This poses an extremely serious threat to the Palestinian cause in both immediate and long-range terms.

The most obvious effects of the new immigration are apparent in relation to the intifada. For over two years, Palestinians under occupation have been mounting an unprecedented struggle that has called into question the future of the Israeli occupation. As a result, the Zionist state is facing the most serious crisis in its history, the more so since its most prized institution, the military, has been unable to end the intifada. On the contrary, the brutality exerted against the Palestinian masses has increased Israel's isolation on the international level, and elicited condemnation even among its closest allies, such as the West European states.

In the midst of this situation, where there is a real possibility that ongoing struggle, combined with international pressure, could eventually push Israel towards withdrawal and conceding to Palestinian rights, a whole new element has been injected. The mass immigration of Soviet Jews provides Israel with a material as well as moral boost. There is no doubt that the Zionist leadership will capitalize on this to try to alleviate the crisis induced by the intifada, and to divert international and local attention away from the Palestinian issue altogether.

Shamir's own statements bear ample witness to this. On January 14th, he told a Likud gathering: «What is clear is that for a big immigration, we need a big and strong state» (*Guardian*, February 6th). Earlier, the prime minister had characterized the Soviet Jewish immigration as follows: «This is one of the great historic opportunities that has been presented to our nation since 1948. Such immigration will have a great impact on the economy, the development, security and demography of our country» (AP, January 8th).

Only when Israelis begin to see that peace would better guarantee their security than war, will there be an Israeli

consensus for withdrawal and dealing with the Palestinian question in terms of the Palestinian people's legitimate rights. The new immigration mitigates against the creation of such a new Israeli consciousness, and it is in this sense that it poses a major threat to the intifada and its goals of freedom and independence. The Israeli leadership has been granted a respite, delaying the time when it will be forced to come to terms with the reality of the Palestinian cause.

The new immigration also increases the danger that the Zionists may opt for «transfer,» i.e., mass expulsion of Palestinians from their homeland as a «final solution.» The Palestinian right of return is further jeopardized, for with the increased immigration, the Zionist leadership is escalating its drive to have already expelled Palestinians resettled in the Arab countries.

Israel has received a new reserve force for the occupation army. This will ease the burden on the soldiers who have already been doing time in the war on the intifada, and thus lessen demoralization in the army, whereas the increase of discontent in the army could be developing into a significant factor mitigating for withdrawal. No less important, Israel is getting a new injection of professionals and other skilled workers who will be useful in further development of industry.

In this context, it is a matter of secondary importance whether the new immigrants are settled in the West Bank and Gaza Strip. Of course, new settlers augment the facts created by the Zionist movement aiming to retain permanent control of the 1967 occupied territories. But the structural ramifications of the projected influx of Soviet Jews are much more profound than the question of whether the new settlers live in the Zionist state, or the West Bank and Gaza Strip. The new immigration is the Zionist leadership's first victory in the demographic battle since emigration from Israel began to exceed immigration over a decade ago. This added to the Zionists' fear of the higher Palestinian birth rate which threatens the dream of a «pure Jewish state» and portends the erosion of

the Jewish majority in Israel itself in the next century.

Today, with the convergence of two quite different impulses on the international level, the Zionist movement is making great leaps in the demographic battle which some estimate to be the most fundamental aspect of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. On the one hand, the US administration's compliance with the Israeli wish, to close the door to Soviet Jews wishing to immigrate to the US, is the decisive factor promoting the new immigration to Israel. On the other hand, one of the effects of the new thinking in Soviet policy has been allowing increased numbers of Jews to emigrate. Whereas prior to 1989, about 90% of Jews leaving the Soviet Union chose a destination other than Israel, with the new US policy, the ratio is reversed. Now, 90% of Jews leaving the Soviet Union are virtually forced to go to Israel, in a situation reminiscent of that prevailing at the end of World War II, when most Western countries closed their doors to holocaust survivors who were channeled to the Zionist state-in-the-making.

In this light, the new immigration not only violates Palestinian rights in their own homeland, but also violates the right of Jewish individuals to choose where they want to live. Once again, it is shown that Zionist immigration policy and US support to this are not determined by human rights considerations, but by the need to have a strong Zionist state in the strategic Middle East.

Based on all these problems, the PLO has called on the Soviet Union to reconsider its policy concerning Jewish emigration. Stemming this new attack on the Palestinian cause should be a prime concern of all those forces who advocate a just peace on the Middle East. The peace efforts exerted so far have revealed that it is Israeli intransigence that is blocking the way. Accordingly, the top priority should be creating the conditions which would induce Israel to withdraw its occupation army and recognize Palestinian rights. Supporting the Palestinian intifada, so that it can continue and escalate, is the main means for enacting such a change. ●