

Should Jews Flee Europe to Israel?

Israeli Prime Minister Netanyahu's appeal to European Jews to seek refuge in Israel has offended many leaders in Europe who reject the charge that recent cases of violent anti-Semitism justify such a drastic step. Netanyahu's call also smacks of political opportunism, says Professor Alon Ben-Meir.

By Alon Ben-Meir

The killing of a security guard at a synagogue in Copenhagen over two weeks ago has renewed Benjamin Netanyahu's call for mass immigration of European Jews to Israel. Although he has made such impetuous appeals before, he now makes a new brazen claim that as Prime Minister of Israel, he represents and can speak on behalf of world Jewry.

This delusionary claim is an insult to European governments and the nearly 1.5 million Jews who live, work, and flourish in Europe. The irony is that Netanyahu represents neither the Jews around the world nor even the majority of Israeli Jews, other than the fraction who voted for Likud in the previous election.

Nevertheless, he seized the opportunity to usurp the political debate in Israel leading up to the election, irrespective of how harmful it may be to the very people he presumably wants to shield, merely because he believes it serves his interests.

Although Israel represents a sanctuary where any Jew is welcome, not a single non-Israeli Jew living outside Israel has appointed Netanyahu to be their spokesperson or protector. No honest observer can deny that the upsurge of violent attacks against Jews is connected to the rise of anti-Semitism, which has not occurred in a vacuum.

It is a direct result of growing anti-Israeli sentiment due to Netanyahu's misguided policies toward the Palestinians and the continuing occupation. Netanyahu's call for European Jews to immigrate to Israel, live in "safety," and not be subjected to terrorism was met with indignation by many Jewish leaders, including the Chief Rabbi of Copenhagen, who said "If the way we deal with terror is to run somewhere else, we should all run to a deserted island."

Western European leaders have also taken great offense. Denmark's Prime Minister Helle Thorning-Schmidt remarked that "[Jews] belong in Denmark. They're part of the Danish community and we wouldn't be the same without the Jewish community," which echoed what the French Prime Minister said following January's terror attacks in Paris on a Jewish supermarket.

Notwithstanding the Jewish Diaspora's affinity for Israel, they are loyal citizens of their respective countries, and Netanyahu's illusion that bringing Jews to Israel will guarantee their security is only surpassed by his craven arrogance. His call for mass immigration alienates Diaspora Jews and may put them at even greater risk. Eighty times more Israelis were killed in Israel by violence with the Palestinians in the past 25 years than all the Jews killed in Europe by terrorists during the same period.

There is no doubt that Netanyahu's call for Jews to immigrate to Israel is also driven by his strong desire to increase the Jewish population in Israel and sustain the Jewish national identity of the state. This also explains his demand that as a prerequisite to reaching a peace agreement, the Palestinians must recognize Israel as the state of the Jewish people.

Here is where Netanyahu's hypocrisy is on full display. Indeed, if he wishes to shield the Jews from acts of terrorism and encourage them to immigrate to sustain a Jewish majority in Israel, he should first focus on addressing the causes behind the rise of violent attacks by vigorously attempting to solve the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

I maintain that once a peace agreement with the Palestinians is reached, many Jews would immigrate to Israel without any prompting. They would be willing to build a new life in Israel not because they will necessarily feel safer there, but because peace would rekindle the pioneering spirit which was behind the mass immigration to Israel in years past, regardless of the uncertainty and the prospect of violence.

Sadly, Israel is no longer arousing that spirit, especially in young European and American Jews, because of the continuing conflict which has sapped it, leaving a void that cannot be filled with empty political slogans.

Netanyahu should wake up to the gloomy reality that nearly one million Israelis emigrated from Israel in the past 25 years. Many of them have left not only because they have become weary of endless violent conflict, but also because they feel betrayed by self-indulgent political leaders.

With only a few exceptions, Israel has been plagued with leaders who are no longer true to the vision behind the creation of Israel. As a result, many Jews have little hope that the political environment will change any time soon, unless new leaders emerge who are committed to ending the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

Not surprisingly, many Israelis who emigrated see no reason why they should return, only to see their children be inducted to a military that has become the

oppressor rather than the proud guardian of a free, independent and prosperous country at peace with itself and with the people that co-inhabit the land. This, of course, doesn't trouble Netanyahu.

For him, this is a do-or-die political campaign. He will do and say anything to remain the focus of public discourse, even by exploiting the sensitive issues of anti-Semitism, violent extremism against the Jews, and Iran's nuclear threat.

He already crossed a major red line by accepting the invitation to address a joint session of Congress to the dismay of many Congressmen and Jewish leaders in and outside Israel, as well as a majority of the American public, while showing complete disrespect to President Barack Obama, and more importantly to the Executive Office of the President.

He is determined to project an image of a courageous leader and the champion of Jewish causes, when in fact he has no courage but raw boldness befitting a politician who would sell his soul to the highest bidder. Consequently, he brought Israel's indispensable relations with the U.S. to a state of crisis, infuriated European leaders, embarrassed Jews everywhere, and further isolated Israel.

The Israeli electorate, who will soon cast their vote, will do well to remember that they must now seek a new horizon and send a loud and clear message to Netanyahu: enough is enough.

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