

Soviet bargaining chips

Recent reports that large numbers of Soviet Jews might be allowed to emigrate have raised a groundswell of hope in the North American Jewish community. Discreet negotiations between Canada's Edgar Bronfman and Soviet authorities added substance to the speculation.

These hopes, I fear, will be dashed. Instead, we will likely see the Soviets continue to use their Jewish citizens in a cynical and opportunistic manner — as bargaining chips to gain economic and political concessions from Washington. Two important, but infrequently discussed factors suggest such a negative view.

First, the Soviet Union's 2.5 million Jews are much more than just another religious or ethnic group. They occupy positions of great influence in Soviet technology, science, medicine and academia. According to some analysts of Soviet affairs, the USSR's defence industry and military-industrial research and development programs might be crippled if Jews were allowed to freely emigrate.

A Jewish brain drain would also pose a security problem to the secretive Soviets. With so many Jewish Russians involved in secret defence and research work, the Soviets must fear the loss of classified data to the West. They are aware that the West's most fruitful source of human intelligence on the USSR comes from Israel, thanks to its widespread contacts in the Soviet Union. What we have, in effect, is the old problem of Pharoah not wanting his brickmakers to depart.

A second, equally important factor, may also limit Jewish emigration. To date, the majority of Soviet Jewish emigrants have not gone to Israel but to the U.S. Now, however, the U.S. government and Zionist groups are working to channel the outflow of Soviet Jews to Israel. But every Soviet Jew who arrives in Israel will cause a storm of protest from

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the Arab states, some of whom are closely allied to the Soviet Union.

Take, for example, the extremely unlikely scenario that all 2.5 million Soviet Jews would be allowed — and would also agree — to emigrate to the Middle East. Israel, a tiny nation, would be swamped. Its housing, social services, financial and land resources would be unable to bear the load. More significant, Israel is fast running out of new water supplies: Providing potable water to even a few hundred thousand arrivals will be a major problem.

The USSR has spent decades and billions of dollars expanding its influence in the Arab World, a region, we should recall, that abuts its southern borders. There is no doubt at all that large numbers of Soviet Jews arriving in Israel would seriously damage, if not destroy, Soviet strategic policy in the Middle East. How would Syria, a close ally of Moscow, react to the arrival of 500,000 Soviet Jews next door, so adding 50,000 troops to the Israeli armed forces.

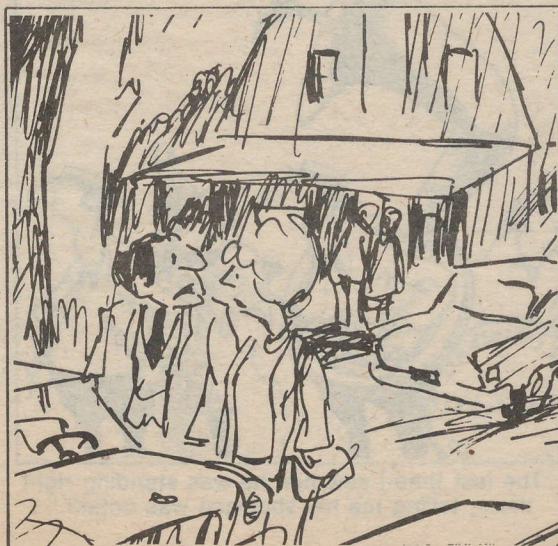
Where would these new immigrants go? Most, one suspects, would end up in territories seized from the Arabs: The West Bank, Gaza and Golan, thus provoking even more tension and hostility. Indeed, Rabbi Kahane may have a point when he says that Israel must expel all of its Arab inhabitants as the only way of accommodating new arrivals from the USSR.

For its part, the USSR will likely allow a steady trickle of Jewish emigrants to leave. By doing so, it pleases the U.S. Congress yet still keeps enough Soviet Jews hostage to exert influence over the American government. We should also remember that the USSR was the second nation, after the U.S., to recognize Israel. Soviet military help, sent through Czechoslovakia, proved decisive in helping Israel win its war of independence.

The clever Soviets have long played a double game in the Middle East, supporting the Arabs, on one hand, yet also quietly aiding Israel, when expedient, as a means of keeping the region divided and in turmoil. Today, Moscow is making certain that it plays a prominent role in the current round of peace diplomacy. Not so subtle pressure is being put on American Jews to adopt a more friendly attitude to the USSR. At the same time, the Arabs are being forcefully reminded that Moscow controls the tap of mass Jewish immigration, an event that they much fear.

Caught in the middle of this power game are the Soviet Union's Jewish citizens. Sadly, they are now and will likely remain hostages to the Soviet system, providing captive brainpower and powerful leverage over Israel, the U.S. Congress and the Arabs.

Punch



"I say goodbye to the people. If you want to say goodbye to the dog, that's your business."