

Fly by morning



Economist.com

WORLD
MIDDLE EAST & AFRICA

America and Israel

Let there be justice for all

Apr 10th 2008 | JERUSALEM

From The Economist print edition

America's Israel lobby scores another questionable victory

ONE of the thorniest questions in an Israeli-Palestinian peace deal, if it ever happens, will be what recompense to give the 4.5m Palestinian refugees and their descendants, of whom only a tiny minority, if any, are likely to be allowed to return to what is now Israel. But now a coalition of Jewish organisations has managed to get a no less thorny problem onto the agenda: compensation for Jews who fled the Arab world.

Some 850,000 Jews were living in Arab countries by the early 20th century but began leaving as Arab attitudes to them soured in the wake of Jewish immigration to Palestine and the later creation of Israel. Often they fled after being attacked or stripped of their property and citizenship. Around 700,000 Palestinians fled or were forced out of Israel at the state's birth. But while most of the Palestinians have remained stateless, living in refugee camps scattered around the Arab world, the Jews all ended up as citizens of Israel and other countries in Europe and the Americas.

Five years of work by Justice for Jews from Arab Countries, a lobby group based in Washington, paid off earlier this month in the form of a resolution passed by America's House of Representatives, which calls on the government to make a policy of insisting on restitution for Jewish refugees as well as Palestinian ones. Though non-binding, the resolution is a big symbolic step for the campaign.

Its advocates claim that putting Jewish restitution on the table is not only a question of justice, but could help solve the Israeli-Palestinian conflict by leading to mutual recognition of the plight of each side's refugees. "Dealing with [both refugee issues] honestly and upfront will increase the odds of a peaceful resolution," says Jerrold Nadler, a Democrat congressman who was one of the bill's sponsors.

But he also mentioned another goal: to show how Arab leaders, by keeping the Palestinian refugees in misery while the West accepted Jewish ones, have used the Palestinians as pawns to whip up anti-Israel feeling. Though true, it makes this look like little more than an effort to reduce the cost to Israel of a peace deal. Certainly, Palestinians will see it as a way to cancel out any restitution they might get. And to Jewish critics of the campaign it looks like just an attempt to derail the peace process. "To say that there is a Jewish refugee problem is to negate the success of Israel as the refuge for all Jews who choose to live there," says M.J. Rosenberg of the Israel Policy Forum, a doveish think-tank in Washington.

Mr Rosenberg is optimistic that the resolution, being non-binding, will "disappear from view". Restitution for Arab Jews is not a hot topic in Israel, where the press largely ignored the congressional vote, though a group of prominent Israelis has started a campaign to publicise the issue. The government is avoiding it for now, for fear of jeopardising the current fragile talks with the Palestinian leadership. In any case, restitution would have to be resolved not with the Palestinians but with Arab countries where Jews used to live; up to now, Israel has not demanded it from countries such as Egypt and Morocco, with which it has long had diplomatic relations.

But the fact that a resolution of doubtful value even to Israel's government, let alone American foreign policy, passed with bipartisan support shows once more the power of the pro-Israel lobby in Washington. The lobby's critics often complain that it represents not Israel but the Israeli right wing. This month a more left-wing Israel lobby group dubbed the "J-Street Project" is due to be launched, based on the premise that unstinting support for Israel's hardliners that exacerbates its confrontations with the Arab world is not actually in Israel's best interests. Whether it can dent the power of the existing lobby on America's Congress remains to be seen.

Copyright © 2008 The Economist Newspaper and The Economist Group. All rights reserved.