

Israel acts to reverse brain drain

Campaign aims to woo home 15,000 highly qualified citizens abroad

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By Jonathan Pearlman, For The Straits Times

TEL AVIV: On flights to Israel, an emotive on-screen advertisement shows a young Israeli woman in New York pining to return to her homeland. 'They will always stay Israelis,' a caption reads. 'Help them return.'

The ad is part of a two-year campaign by the government to lure back some of the best and brightest Israelis who live around the world. Many of them rank among the nation's most highly educated citizens.

The government has expressed growing concern about the brain drain. Immigrant Absorption Minister Sofa Landver has described the emigration of scientists and academics as a 'strategic threat' that could stifle growth.

BACKGROUND STORY

ANIMOSITY ABROAD

'Abroad, people often don't have a good opinion about Israelis or Jews. You often feel like you have to defend Israel, even though you don't always agree with what the government is doing. It is frustrating... I feel this is the one place I can be myself.'

Ms Irit Chaprazaro, a native-born Israeli

'This brain drain, especially at a time of a global economic crisis, is a strategic danger to a country which views its human resource as the most important resource,' she told a conference in the United States last year.

The US\$30 million (S\$38 million) campaign hopes to lure home 15,000 Israelis who have lived abroad for at least two years. It

includes a cellphone application for prospective returnees and incentives such as tax benefits, assistance in finding a job or starting a business, and even tuition for schoolchildren.

According to the Absorption Ministry, about 750,000 Israelis live abroad - a big chunk of the country's population of 7.8 million. Other studies say there are fewer than 550,000. About 60 per cent of these expatriates live in the US and 25 per cent are in Europe.

Mr Yogev Karasenty, a fellow at the Jewish People Policy Institute, a privately funded think-tank in Jerusalem, said concerns about the loss of Israeli expatriates are largely overstated. Many scientists and academics return to Israel and often go abroad because it will lead to a promotion at Israeli universities.

'The number of native-born Jewish Israelis leaving is actually low compared with other Western countries,' he said.

'There have been many non-Israeli-born Jews who saw Israel as a night shelter on the way to other countries. They stayed for several years and moved on. So it is hard to judge the issue just based on the community that was not born here and often did not intend to.'

In Israel, emigrants were once largely seen as a direct rebuke to the hope of the early Zionists that a Jewish state would lead to an 'incoming of the exiles'. There have also been concerns about ensuring a Jewish majority in Israel, where about 20 per cent of the population is Arab.

Experts, however, say most Israelis leave not because of security concerns or a rejection of their country's ethos, but to pursue career opportunities, higher wages and conditions not available in Israel.

Now the stigma surrounding emigrants, who were disparagingly referred to as 'yordim' (or people who have descended), has dissipated.

'We don't call them yordim any more,' said Dr Lilach Lev Ari, head of the sociology department at Israel's Oranim Academic College.

'It is not politically correct. They are emigrants, or expatriates... Most Israeli emigrants respond more to pull factors in other countries than push factors. They are attracted to economic attractions and better employment - maybe they want to live out the American dream or go get a PhD. For most people, it is not easy to leave Israel. It is not a bad country to live in.'

He added that Israel's security situation and the dim prospects for a resolution to the conflict with the Palestinians have had little impact on emigration. With a strong economy, there are few reasons for the average young professional to leave Israel these days.

Sitting on a park bench in Tel Aviv, Ms Irit Chaprazaro, 27, a native-born Israeli who is completing her legal qualifications, said she could see herself leaving temporarily for work reasons but sees her long-term future in Israel.

'This is my place,' she said. 'I want to raise my children here. If I had a work opportunity or something, I would have no problem in going away. But I don't have any plans to live abroad.'

She has travelled widely, even spending seven months in South-east Asia before starting her studies. She said she has found it difficult dealing with the presumptions that people abroad - particularly in Europe - often have about Israelis.

'Abroad, people often don't have a good opinion about Israelis or Jews,' she said. 'You often feel like you have to defend Israel, even though you don't always agree with what the government is doing. It is frustrating... I feel this is the one place I can be myself.'

Dr Lev Ari said the government's campaign to lure back citizens was based primarily on economics, rather than concerns about demographics. Indeed, she said, there is a brain drain of highly qualified young people - and the government is shrewdly trying to win them back.

'The main reason (for the campaign) is that Israel does not have many immigrants any more,' she said. 'The large waves of

immigration from the beginning of the 1990s - mainly from the former Soviet Union - have fallen to 20,000 people a year... Like every Western country, the Israeli government wants the best people. They want them to come back and have their investment returned.'

Indeed, Mr Karasenty said the campaign may be aimed at a domestic audience as much as at expatriates abroad.

'I think it is not just about trying to get Israelis back,' he said. 'It is also directed at Israeli citizens in Israel, to strengthen their feeling of being in their right place.'