



What Million Missing Israelis?

*Originally posted in foreignpolicy.com, by Yogev Karasenty and Shmuel Rosner
Posted On Thursday, July 28, 2011 - 8:12 PM*

Demography is like magic. Put the right numbers in the wrong hands, and you get manipulation. Put the wrong numbers in the right hands, and you get miscalculation. But the case of "**The Million Missing Israelis**" -- an article published in on ForeignPolicy.com at the beginning of July by Joseph Chamie and Barry Mirkin -- is a hard one to categorize. Indeed, the two writers have the wrong numbers. They also make some statements that might raise suspicions related to motivations -- namely, that their demography is driven by a political agenda rather than science.

Chamie and Mirkin argue that the unpublicized story of emigration from Israel is no less significant than the story of Jewish immigration back to the homeland, and that it has reached a point at which it should be considered a threat to Israel's future as a Jewish state -- both demographically but no less important ideologically. "The departure of Jewish Israelis also contributes to the undermining of the Zionist ideology," the authors write, based on the assumption that a million Israelis have chosen to leave the country since its 1948 birth. Magnanimously, they take the trouble to also include lower estimations of departing Israelis -- "the official estimate of 750,000 Israeli emigrants -- 10 percent of the population" -- but even so, that doesn't change the perception that Israel is just like "Mexico, Morocco, and Sri Lanka." Not the most exemplary models of prosperity and success.

One wonders whether the necessary readjustment of numbers -- following the analysis that we are about to present -- will also change some of the far-fetched doomsday conclusions the authors reach at the end of their article. What Chamie and Mirkin present to readers leads them to conclude that the numbers pose "grave political challenges and jeopardizes the basic Jewish character and integrity of Israel." Their numbers, though, are totally off the mark. As for their conclusions, that is for readers to decide.



We should start with this simple statement: There are not a "million missing Israelis." A study conducted under the auspices of our think tank, the Jewish People Policy Institute - one that has not yet been released but will be published in a couple of weeks -- will put the real number of "missing" Israelis at a much lower number. According to Israel's **Bureau of Statistics**, since the establishment of the state up until the end of 2008, 674,000 Israelis left the country and did not return after more than a year abroad. An unknown number, estimated to be between 102,000 and 131,000, have died since, putting the number of living Israelis abroad at the end of 2008 at 543,000 to 572,000 (if one counts the dead abroad, one should also count the dead in Israel -- this will not change the number of leaving Israelis but will definitely change the percentage of them). An updated model developed by the Bureau of Statistics at the end of 2008 put the number of not-returning Israelis abroad at 518,000, but added to it a category of 290,000 "non-resident" Israelis. This last number is a tricky one, as it includes the children of Israelis born abroad if they were registered with the Israeli authorities. Such children have never lived in Israel and can hardly be considered "missing," but if one adds them to the mix one gets to 808,000 Israelis, of which more than 100,000 have already died. Bottom line: Some 670,000 to 700,000 official "Israelis" (including children) live outside Israel today.

But here's where the narrative gets more complicated. Much more complicated -- and fascinating -- if one cares to understand the real story of missing Israelis. Israel is a country of many immigrants, as Chamie and Mirkin did bother to note when they wrote about "another important factor contributing to the outflow of Jewish Israelis," that is, "previous emigration experience." But they didn't quite explain the meaning of what they'd written: Israel is a melting pot for some -- not unlike the United States -- but also a stop-on-the-way-to-someplace-else for others. In many cases, it is a gateway for people escaping repressive regimes or poverty.

Take, for example, the huge wave of immigrants who flew in droves to Israel after the collapse of the Soviet Union. According to Israeli Interior Ministry records, 1.1 million immigrants from the former Soviet Union entered Israel between January 1989 and December 2002. However, 8.8 percent of those newcomers -- some 100,000 *olim* (the



Hebrew term used to describe those choosing to "climb up" to Israel) -- had decided not to remain in Israel and quite quickly moved on to their countries of choice. Should such newcomers be counted as "leaving Israelis"? Should their departure be considered a blow to Zionist dreams? Or maybe these immigrants were merely people leaving the Soviet Union, making the first available escape, without ever seriously considering Israel as their long-term place of residence?

The answer of course is that some were and some weren't. Some wanted to live in Israel but then regretted it; some were headed for America and would only pass through Israel, as it was an accessible route. Hebrew University professor Sergio **DellaPergola argues** that Israel's ability to retain more than 90 percent of Soviet immigrants is in fact quite impressive, when one compares it, for example, with foreign-born "ethnic" Germans immigrating to the mother country between 1954 and 1999 but leaving it at a **staggering 60 percent rate**.

Want some more complications? The threat of "leaving Israelis" that are presumably jeopardizing "the basic Jewish character and integrity of Israel" -- as Chamie and Mirkin suggested -- can only possibly refer to leaving Jewish Israelis. When Israeli Arabs leave the country, they don't undermine the Zionist dream and in fact contribute some to the preserving of Israel's "Jewish character." That is quite obvious, isn't it? But Chamie and Mirkin include the leaving Arab Israelis in all of their calculations (DellaPergola's estimate of **850,000 emigrants** also includes Arab Israelis, children and the dead), leading their readers to assume that all those leaving are in fact Jewish. But according to Israel's Bureau of Statistics, some 100,000 leaving Israelis were Arab Israelis.

All told, of the 674,000 Israeli emigrants from 1948 to 2008 (children born abroad not included), about 100,000 were Arabs and about **300,000 were not born** in Israel. That's important, because all serious measures of emigration must (and do) take into account whether one is native-born or foreign-born, as foreign-born tend to leave more easily and are less attached to the country in which they reside. It turns out that the number of native-born Jewish Israelis leaving is pretty low -- less than 300,000. This is not analogous to the numbers from "Mexico, Morocco, and Sri Lanka," but it is rather similar to those of Australia, Canada, Finland, or Germany. Native-born Greeks, Irish, Swiss, and New Zealanders all leave their respective countries in higher percentages than do Israeli-born Israelis.



Israel does suffer from brain-drain patterns similar to those felt in most countries, and the percentage of Israeli academics working abroad is among the highest in the world. That's partially because of economic conditions in Israel's colleges and universities and partially because Israeli academics are actually encouraged and expected to study abroad. But Israel has also evinced a **remarkable ability** to draw back young and bright Israeli scholars when it puts its mind to it. **One study has shown** that returning Israelis aren't just better educated than average Israelis, but are also better educated than those choosing to stay in their new countries of choice. In many cases, the best and the brightest are those coming back.

We don't deny that Israel has problems. Keeping Israelis in Israel and bringing back Israelis who live abroad has always been a concern for the Israeli government, and is still very much on the minds of policymakers. But that is not because Israel suffers from emigration notably more than other countries. Israelis worry so much about their emigrants because of the high value they put on every fellow citizen, because of the close-knit (and at times suffocating) nature of Israeli society. Yes, it's also because they see every person's escape as a blow to Zionism. But the fact of the matter is this: The overall percentage of leaving native-born Israelis is comparable to that of many other OECD countries. And that is no small achievement for a country living under constant security threat and having to survive in a hostile and volatile neighborhood.