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# REFUGEE CLAIMS FROM ISRAEL LOWEST SINCE '01

By **Ron Csillag, JTA** - May 26, 2010

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Israel's oft-repeated pleas to Canada that the Jewish state does not produce refugees may be getting through.

Figures obtained by The CJN from the Immigration and Refugee Board (IRB) reveal that Canada's acceptance rate of refugees from Israel in 2009 was the lowest in nine years.

Of 293 refugee claims from Israel finalized last year, just 15 were approved—an acceptance rate of five per cent, the lowest since 2001.

The IRB rejected 198 claims from Israel last year. The rest were either abandoned or withdrawn. A further 921 claims from Israel are still pending.

Ottawa's acceptance of claimants from Israel has been dropping steadily since 2005, when the approval rate was 31 per cent.

Canada's acceptance of those who claim a "well-founded fear of persecution" in Israel has been a sore point between the two countries since the early 1990s, when the first waves of Jews leaving the former Soviet Union began arriving in Israel under the Law of Return.

Many of these émigrés then springboarded to other countries, including Canada, claiming they were persecuted in Israel. Typically, the asylum-seekers alleged that while in the Jewish state, they faced discrimination and were denied jobs and housing, and even threatened and harassed because of mixed marriages or questionable status as Jews.

Israel has always argued that as a democratic, multicultural nation, it does not produce refugees. The Israeli argument has always been that claimants' stories of persecution are spurious and designed simply to gain entry to other countries.

In 2005, Israel's absorption ministry reported that nearly nine per cent of immigrants from former Soviet republics leave Israel, with Canada being a favourite destination.

The IRB does not track the reasons, whether political, religious or personal, for granting asylum. Neither does it keep records of the birthplace of claimants.

Edward Corrigan, a London, Ont.-based immigration lawyer who has handled several claims from Arab-Israelis, says the "bulk" of refugee claims from Israel are no longer from ex-Soviets but from Palestinians and Arabs who hold Israeli citizenship.

He said some claimants have alleged they were pressured into spying for Israeli intelligence agencies, putting them at great risk. Some of his clients, Corrigan noted, have alleged they were "coerced" and "blackmailed" into spying for Israel.

Over the past five years, he said he has won five cases and lost seven involving refugee claims by Arabs with Israeli citizenship.

Corrigan said he "has not heard of any" Israeli Arabs whose claims failed and who faced grave danger on their return to Israel, though "there have been consequences." Those, he said, have included Israel's refusal to renew Israeli passports and travel documents.

Corrigan stressed that Israel has many "strong and vibrant" human rights organizations advocating on behalf of Jews and Arabs alike.

He said he's currently representing a refugee claimant who is a conscientious objector to Israel's mandatory military service. The man is a Russian Christian who came to Israel under the Law of Return and fears returning.

The IRB has a separate category of claimants from "Palestine," who are technically stateless under international refugee statutes. These claimants may have resided in the West Bank or Gaza, or filed claims against their country of residence.

IRB numbers on Palestine show that in 2009, 62 per cent, or 39 of the 63 cases finalized, were granted asylum. The success rate the year before was 79 per cent.

Corrigan said claimants from the West Bank and Gaza often face danger of persecution or worse if they were even suspected of collaborating with Israel.

A spokesperson at Israel's embassy in Ottawa had no comment on the latest IRB numbers for Israel.

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