

Potential Harder Life Concerns French Jews Pondering Aliyah to Israel

As more and more French Jews nervously consider moving to Israel to escape rising anti-Semitism, many worry the Jewish state may not be as much of a promised land as they would hope.

Three days of violence in Paris two weeks ago, when four Jews were among the 17 people killed by Islamist militants, has made aliyah—or ascent to Israel—the main topic among the country's 550,000-strong Jewish community, Europe's largest.

Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu appeared to encourage departures, telling French Jews at the weekend that "Israel is also your home."

But in debates in Jewish neighborhoods or at Israeli information sessions, worries about what awaits them—notably the loss of generous French social benefits—are as strong as concerns over the growing hostility they face here.

"After what's happened, everybody's talking about it and more people want to leave," said Sami, 38, a financial analyst living near the Hyper Cacher kosher grocery in eastern Paris where four hostages died last Friday.

"But we don't want to leave at any price," he said. "It's like starting a new life. We're French and it's an Israeli culture there. They don't recognize all our university degrees. You need Hebrew, so you have to learn a new language."

"I talked about it with my wife yesterday, and we got into a fight," said Sami, a member of a volunteer parents' security service to protect the nearby Jewish school his children

attend.

At an information fair run by the Jewish Agency, which promotes migration to Israel, a middle-aged man who certifies food as kosher—or fit to consume under Jewish law—worried he wouldn't find a job. "They have plenty of kosher certifiers there," he said.

In one corner of the room, couples huddled with Israeli social security officials, glumly comparing the services they enjoy in France to Israel's leaner healthcare coverage, unemployment support or pension payments.

Even the attraction of living securely among Jews is countered by other realities. "It would be easier to live as a Jew there, but they have terrorism too," said psychologist Yakov Kowarski, 59, who hides his kippa under a cloth cap.

'Huge Potential for Emmigration'

France became the world's leading country for migrants to Israel last year with about 7,000 departures, more than double those in 2013. The Jewish Agency originally estimated the 2015 total at 10,000 but officials now say it could reach 15,000 as a result of the attacks.

French Prime Minister Manuel Valls bristled at Netanyahu's invitation to French Jews and the thought that a minority dating back two millennia could disappear, declaring: "France without French Jews would not be France."

The Jewish Agency has stepped up its operations in Paris, now holding information fairs for potential immigrants every three weeks rather than twice a year as before, chairman Natan Sharansky told Reuters at the meeting on Sunday.

About 50,000 Jews attended the sessions last year, said Sharansky, a former Soviet dissident who made aliyah in 1986. "The potential for aliyah is huge," he added.

The Jewish Agency said calls to its French call center had spiked in recent days, but visitors to Sunday's information fair said they did not come because of last week's attacks.

"We've been thinking this over for the past four years and still can't decide," said a woman afraid to go to her work at a Jewish creche after being insulted and spat on in the street.

"I'm French, born and educated here," she protested. "Why should I have to leave my job after 30 years and emigrate?"

Returnees

The flip side of aliyah is that an estimated 20 percent of French migrants return within five years. Some richer businessmen opt for "Boeing aliyah," moving families to Israel but keeping jobs in France and commuting at weekends.

"My sister lives in Israel and she says it's tough," a young man named Mikhael said outside the Hyper Cacher grocery. "If you're not set up in advance with a job and housing, it's very difficult."

Migration seems most difficult for working-class Jews, many of whom live in suburbs with larger Muslim populations, because France's healthcare, education and childcare benefits fill important gaps in their budgets.

These poorer Jews are mostly from Sephardic families that emigrated from North Africa in the 1960s as former French colonies there became independent.

"The French are used to getting assistance on all sides," said Sydney Arous, 71, a former karate coach who migrated to the southern Israeli port of Ashdod in the 1980s and now helps other French settle in.

"They get stipends there in France that are large enough to live on, but here it's very bad," he told Reuters. "The

biggest problem is housing ... and there is unemployment.”

French children often had adjustment problems at school, Arous added, and adults used to French manners winced at Israel’s rough and tumble ways.

France’s Chief Rabbi Haim Korsia doesn’t criticize departing congregants but told a memorial service in the capital’s Grand Synagogue: “France is our language, our dreams, our hope for the future.”

Standing outside the city morgue on Monday as victims’ bodies were taken away for burial in Israel, Andre Cohen said aliyah was always an option for Jews.

“Ideally it’s done during one’s lifetime,” said Cohen, an official of a Paris Jewish school. “For our deceased brothers, it’s terrible to return to Israel like this.”

(Editing by Pravin Char)

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