

Russian Authorities Demand the Jewish Agency Cease Operations Within that Country

Russia's Ministry of Justice has demanded that the Jewish Agency stop its operations in the country, accusing the agency of "violations of Russian law."

The Jewish Agency is an organization that helps Jews immigrate to Israel.

According to reports by Russian news agencies RIA Novosti and Interfax on Thursday, Moscow is expected to hold a preliminary court hearing on the matter on July 28.

Though angered by the order, the Jewish Agency and the Israeli government think it is "reversible," according to Israel's Ynet news. "We will continue to act through diplomatic channels, so that the Jewish Agency's important activity will not cease," said Israeli Prime Minister Yair Lapid in a statement.

Following a situation assessment, Israel will send to Russia a joint delegation from the prime minister's office, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the Ministry of Justice and the Ministry of Aliyah and Integration to ensure the continuation of the Jewish Agency's activity in Russia.

According to Lapid, "The Jewish community in Russia is deeply connected with Israel. Its importance arises in every diplomatic discussion with the Russian leadership."

The Jewish Agency is a semi-governmental, international organization and the main body that facilitates *aliyah*—Jewish

immigration to Israel. The agency has set out to ensure Jewish safety around the world and to strengthen Jews' connection to Israel.

The Jerusalem Post reported earlier this month that Russian authorities sent the agency a letter specifying "administrative issues" and pointing to the "possible legal consequences" of "problems." Moscow claimed that the agency had been illegally collecting information on Russian citizens and transferring the data in violation of the law. The report noted that if the agency's operations in Russia are halted, it will be the first time in 30 years that its efforts are banned. Under the Iron Curtain, Soviet Jews were unable to emigrate for many years. Since 1970, however, almost 2 million Jews and their relatives have emigrated from the former Soviet Union.

According to Israeli government data, around 7,000 Jews made *aliyah* from Russia last year. Since February, the beginning of Russia's war with Ukraine, 16,000 Russian Jews have moved to Israel, the Jewish Agency said.

Tensions between Russia and Israel have been on the rise ever since the invasion of Ukraine. While Israel sent Ukraine humanitarian aid, medical personnel and equipment for first responders and eventually criticized Moscow's actions, the Jewish Agency has helped refugees from the embattled country resettle in Israel.

Israel's Channel 12 quoted Russian Ambassador to Israel, Anatoly Viktorov, on Wednesday, as saying in private that "Yair Lapid as prime minister could create problems for Israeli-Russian relations."

A former Israeli foreign minister, Lapid has been outspoken in his criticism of Russia's actions, becoming Israel's first lawmaker to refer to them as "war crimes." Lapid also pushed for holding a vote to condemn Russia at the United Nations.

Ynet noted that Russian President Vladimir Putin did not call to congratulate Lapid after the lawmaker assumed the prime minister role from now-Alternate Prime Minister Naftali Bennett.

Lapid has earned criticism from within Israel as people have reminded him on social media that Israel has solid security interests, vis-a-vis the Russians, regarding the Iranian presence in Syria. Diplomats on both sides later denied Channel 12's report.

Nevertheless, many in Israel suspect that Russia's crackdown on the Jewish Agency in its country is politically motivated and would not have happened if Israel had not broken its silence and adopted a harsher stance on the Ukraine war.

"Russian Jews will not be held hostage by the war in Ukraine," said Israeli Diaspora Affairs Minister Nachman Shai. "The attempt to punish the Jewish Agency for Israel's stance on the war is deplorable and offensive." {eo}

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