

Was This Israeli Woman's Arrest in Russia a Corrupt Bargaining Chip?

This week, a 27-year-old dual American-Israeli citizen, Na'ama Issachar, came home to Israel ending a 10-month catastrophe where she was thrust into, and victim of, Russia's intertwined judicial and political system. Na'ama was arrested during a layover in Moscow, flying on Aeroflot from India to Israel. Aeroflot has become one of the airlines with the largest number of flights into and out of Israel on a daily basis. Because of the ability to connect in Moscow to countries all over the world at relatively inexpensive rates, it is frequented by Israeli tourists and businesspeople.

During the layover she was arrested for drug trafficking, allegedly having less than 10 grams of cannabis in her possession. The allegation is not that she had the drugs on her body, or even in her carry-on bag so she could have done something illegal in Russia. It was allegedly in her checked luggage to which she would have had no access, and which she was not even intending to retrieve in Moscow, but which was meant to be checked through all the way to Tel Aviv.

Nevertheless, Russia arrested her, and sentenced her to an incredible 7.5 years in prison for what would be otherwise a misdemeanor anywhere else, even apparently according to Russian law. While Russia remains adamant that she had the drugs in her possession, there are reports that this may have been a set up, and that she was unknowingly forced to retrieve her luggage and exit the airport in order to be caught with drugs (planted) in her bag, and arrested.

After her arrest, her name and case have received wide attention in the Israeli media and the public eye. There's

been an outcry for her release because it all seemed so fabricated and unjust. It has raised the question among Israelis whether it's safe to fly through Russia, not because Aeroflot may or may not be a reliable airline, but because one never knows whether one might be subject to politically motivated extra-judicial Russian arrest.

Why would Russia care at all, and why would there be any interest in setting up a 27-year-old American-Israeli woman, and sentencing her to such an unusually harsh punishment?

Initially it was suspected that Russia arrested Na'ama in order to leverage Israel not to extradite a Russian man to America, arrested for a massive internet fraud. (The Russian was since extradited and pleaded guilty.) Then it was suspected that Russia was using Na'ama as a bargaining chip for getting Israel to turn over land in central Jerusalem that Israel had purchased from Russia in exchange for \$3.5 million in 1964. Israelis are widely opposed to giving Russia a larger foothold in Jerusalem.

Endless speculation has taken place over what kind of reciprocal gesture Israel has committed to in exchange for Russian President Vladimir Putin's pardon of Na'ama this week. One issue is the ongoing unique relationship with Russia largely controlling much of Syria, and Israel's relative freedom of operation to strike Iranian and other military targets in Syrian territory. It's presumed that Russia and Israel have developed a *modus vivendi* with Russia sanctioning, if not facilitating, Israeli strikes. Certainly, Russia has an agenda in Iran not becoming too entrenched in Syria, or undermining Russian Interests. But it's hard to imagine Russia not "allowing" Israel a degree of unrestrained operation there without getting something in return.

Whatever the case, it's inconceivable that Putin has suddenly become a humanitarian and let Na'ama go after her 10-month ordeal simply because he's a good guy and wanted to right a

terrible wrong.

Whatever the motivation or payback that Putin will receive, it may never be made public. Certainly not until after Israel's March election. But with Na'ama's release, some Israelis are asking, was it worth the price, whatever it may be?

I have some experience in redeeming captives from Russia, in the old days when it was the USSR and there was no pretense for their being humanitarian. Jews have a long and painful history in Russia, persecuted by the Czars and the Soviets, and for decades prevented to leave, and persecuted even more for trying to do so.

Jewish tradition mandates redeeming captives, but not at any price, especially if it's clear that someone has been taken captive and his or her redemption would be license to take more Jews captive. In the case where one might encourage kidnappers seeking financial gain by capturing Jews and demanding a ransom, redeeming captives is not required and may even be prohibited. A famous case of this restriction was arrest of a great 13th century Jewish leader, Rabbi Meir of Rothenburg. He is said to have forbidden his community from redeeming him because of the threat that his being taken hostage would be repeated with others.

In modern Israel, the issue of redeeming captive soldiers (and even their remains) is tested too often, and deliberated repeatedly. Israel has paid very high prices in freeing numerous terrorists with blood on their hands in exchange for relatively few Israelis under the mandate to redeem captives. There's also a concern that soldiers would not perform or put themselves at risk if they thought that, if taken captive, Israel would not try to bring them home. It's a contentious issue that birthed a recent movement of mainly religious soldiers signing documents prohibiting them from being exchanged for terrorists, should they be taken captive.

As to the lengths a country would, or should, undertake to redeem a civilian held captive in another country for an alleged violation of a civil crime, even if sentenced to an unusually harsh imprisonment, Israel is always at the forefront. Yet as much as Israelis, and certainly Na'ama and her family, are happy that she is home and her ordeal has ended, Israelis will continue to wonder what Russia was promised in return, if it was worth it, or even the responsibility of a country to take such resources and personal appeals to Putin to do so. {eo}