

Palestinians don't want to leave Gaza? Don't tell it to an ex-Soviet!

Lev Tsitrin

Trump's announcement of his plan for US takeover of Gaza after Gazans emigrate crammed newspaper front pages and airwaves with objections. Those were multi-fold: is this legal? who will agree to take the Gazans? And last but not least – Gazans won't leave Gaza – they will hold fast to what is their homeland (this one was actually shouted back at Trump by a journalist during Trump's press-conference with Netanyahu; Trump ignored it.)

In me – an ex-Soviet – this latter argument brought to mind a joke in the genre the Soviets called “political anecdote” (in Russian, the word “anecdote” means not just any story but a one with a completely unexpected punchline that forces the listener to erupt in uproarious laughter. No social gathering was complete without swapping them.)

The anecdote ran as follows: after her Moscow concert, Brezhnev invites French superstar Mireille Mathieu (perhaps not too familiar to American audiences, she was all but worshiped by us Soviets for hits like [*Pardonne-moi ce caprice d'enfant*](#)) to a Kremlin party, and she asks him a political question: “Mr. Secretary-General, why won't you open Soviet borders for free travel?” Brezhnev gives her back a knowing look and replies with a broad smile: “you playgirl! You want the two of us to be left alone?”



The message of the joke is not hard to decipher: given the opportunity, the Soviets would have left the Soviet Union en masse.

It also brings back a much more personal (and painful) memory from around the same time: as the Soviet-American detente kicked in in the mid-1970es, Soviet Jews were allowed to exit the country, and many – though by no means all – availed themselves of the opportunity, several of my classmates including. My family didn't budge – we had a close relative in America who in his letters strongly opposed immigration (when I came a decade later, and made a personal acquaintance with the gentleman, he turned out to be a Stalinist nostalgic for the good old times – even though he spend some eight years in Stalin's gulag. Go figure!). So when after a summer break I showed up back in school, my classmates were dumbfounded – and looked at me as if they saw a ghost, with utter incomprehension: was I still here? Only later, I understood why. Being ethnic Russians, they had no way to leave – and they envied Jews who could. Not leaving the Soviet Union while having the opportunity to leave it was for them something beyond comprehension. They naturally assumed that I would, and seeing me back in school was a shocker.

Soviet officialdom pictured those leaving the country as outliers and outcasts, subjecting them to condemnations at workplaces, and to heavy fines (my exit visa cost three times my monthly salary). They even commissioned a [rousing popular song](#) that was frequently played on the radio (the lyrics translating roughly as “seasonal birds fly away, but I stay with you, my native homeland – I need no foreign sun or foreign land”).

Well, the official sentiment was not shared by the Soviets who would have been only too happy to “fly away” given the opportunity. (In fact, a very large number of pretty Russian girls found that opportunity in marrying foreign students, mostly from the Arab countries. Putin’s attraction to Syria is based partly on the fact that he sees it as being ethnically part-Russian: Assad Syria sent its Alawites to Russian universities to be trained as ruling elites – and thousands came back with Russian wives.)

All of which brings me back to the “patriotic” objection to Trump’s Gaza plan – the objection that Palestinians won’t leave their Gaza “homeland” no matter the hardship of staying there. My experience as an ex-Soviet tells me otherwise.

Propaganda will say what it will – but the folks will do what makes sense. And in flattened Gaza – no less than in the Soviet Union – plain common sense says, “leave it if you can.” In announcing his Gaza plan, Trump knew what he was talking about. He knows Gazans’ dreams much better than Hamas does.