

Bates College

SCARAB

Speeches

Edmund S. Muskie Papers

2-8-1972

Statement by Senator Edmund S. Muskie on the Soviet Jewish Refugee Act of 1972

Edmund S. Muskie

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scarab.bates.edu/msp>

CONTACT: Dick Stewart
Herb Hadad
(202) USA 1972

IMMEDIATELY
February 8, 1972

THE SOVIET JEWISH REFUGEE ASSISTANCE ACT
OF 1972:

STATEMENT BY EDMUND S. MUSKIE (D-ME.) IN THE SENATE
February 8, 1972

I am introducing today a bill to authorize \$85 million for assistance to Soviet Jewish refugees in Israel--The Soviet Jewish Refugee Act of 1972.

The plight of Jews in the Soviet Union has for some time been a matter of great concern and sorrow in this country. We cannot fail to be greatly moved, because of our own tradition of religious and personal liberty, with the example of a minority in the Soviet Union struggling against such overwhelming odds to preserve its ancient religious and cultural traditions in what appears to be an increasingly hostile environment. In recent years the attention of the world has been focused sharply on the plight of Soviet Jewry by the victims' own courageous public protest and demand for the right to emigrate to Israel.

In Congress there have been several bipartisan efforts to call attention to this problem and to do what little we can to influence the Soviet government in the direction of a nondiscriminatory policy toward the Jewish people of the USSR. We have tried to render what small assistance we can to the struggle of this brave people to maintain their identity and their right to worship God as they see fit. And we must continue to do what we can as long as repression of the Jewish people continues in the Soviet Union.

But in recent months there has been a surprising new development in Soviet policy. The motivations remain obscure, but the results are dramatic -- a sudden increase in the number of Soviet Jews allowed to emigrate to Israel. In the one month of December, 1971, three times as many Jews emigrated from the Soviet Union as in all of 1970. The increased rate is continuing in 1972.

M O R E

and it is now anticipated that between forty and sixty thousand Soviet Jewish immigrants will arrive in Israel this year.

On January 8 of this year, I suggested in a statement that the United States should be prepared to assist these refugees resettle in Israel -- for it is to Israel that they strongly desire to go. I pointed out that this new Soviet policy was a blessing -- but a blessing accompanied by staggering financial and social burdens for Israel. We know from our own experience with some 650,000 Cuban refugees in the past twelve years and some 30,000 Hungarian refugees in 1958 and 1959 how difficult it is to absorb substantial numbers of refugees -- and we are a nation of more than 200 million.

For Israel's three million people, the task is awesome. Given our relative populations, it is as if the United States was suddenly confronted with the need to absorb into its social and economic structure an additional two to three million people, roughly the size of Philadelphia or Los Angeles. Housing must be built, food provided, and jobs created. A new language must be taught. Health and educational facilities must be found. New communities must be developed. Counselling and training are required. None but the Israelis can build the homes, teach the languages, find the jobs, and otherwise pay the social costs of giving freedom to Soviet Jews. But there is a financial cost as well -- estimated at several hundred million dollars -- and that is something I believe we can and must help with.

When I raised this problem last month, I suggested that there were three principal reasons why the United States should help in this effort. These reasons are worth repeating:

First, since World War II, the United States has contributed more than \$2.8 billion to refugee assistance, directly and through intergovernmental organizations. We spent close to \$600 million to assist Cuban refugees. From 1947 to 1951, we contributed \$237 million to the International Refugee Organization. In the early 1950's, we contributed almost \$85 million to aid Korean refugees. And for Arab refugees, we have contributed more than \$500 million. We have never forgotten that we were founded and populated by the refugees of an earlier world. Our commitment to this cause is inscribed on the base of the Statue of Liberty.

Second, there is the long history of our concern with persecution on account of religion, and, in the last half century, particularly with the persecution of Jews. Beginning in the early 1900's, our national leaders have fought for the freedom and dignity of the world's Jewish community. We played a major role in the creation of Israel; we have been its firm defender ever since.

Third, beyond humanitarian concerns, there is our clear self-interest in the health and well-being of Israel. War is not the only danger to a healthy Israel. Economic disaster can accomplish what war could not, if we let it. A country the size of Israel, with its heavy defense burdens, cannot afford the several hundred million dollars that will be required for the anticipated influx of Soviet Jews over and above Israel's normal budget for immigrants - and Israel has already spent enormous sums in recent years receiving and integrating hundreds of thousands of Jewish refugees from Middle Eastern countries.

For all these reasons, therefore, we must be prepared to help Israel cope with the new influx of Soviet Jewish refugees. Since proposing such assistance last January, I have asked my staff to explore the best possible means of providing it. We have consulted with members and staff in both Houses of Congress, with the Department of State which administers current refugee programs, and with many individuals and groups outside the government who are most familiar with the present situation. The result of these consultations is the legislation being introduced today.

First, the bill we are introducing today is bipartisan. This is the kind of humanitarian issue which attracts bipartisan support, and it is imperative that it be made clearly bipartisan and not the creature of any one man or party. I am particularly pleased, therefore, to be joined by my distinguished colleagues on both sides of the aisle, Senator Ribicoff, Senator Javits and Senator Schweiker, in introducing this legislation today. We are eager for the widest possible co-sponsorship, and we invite other Senators to join us in this effort.

This same legislation is being introduced on a bipartisan basis in the House today by Congressman Jonathan B. Bingham and Seymour Halpern. Congressmen Bingham and Halpern are also seeking the widest possible cosponsorship in the House.

Secondly, we are suggesting as the most appropriate level of assistance to Israel a sum of \$85 million. We are well aware that the financial burden on Israel for resettling these new immigrants will amount to several times this figure. If the current rate of immigration from the Soviet Union continues next year and into the future, we would most certainly want to consider additional assistance. For the moment, however, we believe that \$85 million is an appropriate and realistic initial commitment.

Third, we believe that the most appropriate vehicle for such assistance is the Department of State which has been designated by the President as the administering authority for our refugee assistance programs abroad. We note with satisfaction that the State Department is already providing some funds, albeit at a very modest level, for maintenance costs in Vienna for Soviet Jewish refugees in transit to Israel. We applaud this effort, and we hope that in this same spirit the administration will provide substantially more funds in the State Department budget for resettlement costs in Israel -- a much larger financial commitment, to be sure, but one which we believe to be amply justified. The Administration has already indicated that aid to Israel should not be a political issue this year. It is all the more appropriate that humanitarian assistance of this kind should be taken completely out of the political arena.

We hope, therefore, that the legislation we are proposing today will receive the broadest possible support in Congress and in the Administration. The burden on Israel and on the refugees is already enormous. We must not delay in acting -- and in acting generously.

Mr. President, I ask unanimous consent that the bill be printed in the record at this point.

Be it enacted by the Senate and House of Representatives of the United States of America in Congress assembled, That the Secretary of State is authorized to furnish, on terms and conditions he considers appropriate, assistance to Israel, including assistance for housing, clothes, food, medical care, education and training, for the resettlement in Israel of Jewish refugees from the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics. There are authorized to be appropriated to the Secretary not to exceed \$85,000,000 to carry out the provisions of this Act.

#