New York City, the Jewish Community, and Refugee Resettlement in the 21st Century

Lessons From Yemen

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HIAS—the Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society—was established in New York City during the Russian Czarist pogroms to assist with the resettlement of the hundreds of thousands of Jews arriving on Ellis Island at the end of the 19th century. Nearly 100 years later, in the framework created right after the passage of the Refugee Act of 1980, HIAS took on the role as the national refugee resettlement agency of the American Jewish community. HIAS thus formalized its longstanding relationship as a partner of the Department of State in the resettlement of refugees in the United States, as well as the processing of refugees overseas. Since that time, the State Department has maintained a total of ten or fewer faith-based and secular national resettlement partners, and HIAS has always been at the table as the representative of the American Jewish community.

Although HIAS administers the American Jewish community's "Cooperative Agreement" with the Department of State, it relies on its local partner agencies—Jewish federations, family service agencies, and other local organizations—to actually welcome and integrate arriving refugees in communities throughout America. To enable the American Jewish community to carry out this life-saving work, HIAS provides advocacy and technical support, oversees and monitors the resettlement work of its affiliates, and passes federal funding to its local partners, which then supplement that funding with local public and private dollars.

During the 1990s, New York has continued to live up to its image as the *die Goldene Tir (door)* to *die Goldene Medinah*. During that decade, HIAS resettled nearly 254,000 Jews—the overwhelming majority of them from the former Soviet Union in the United States. Of these, 47% (119,000) were resettled in New York City alone by HIAS' partner agency, the New York Association for New Americans (NYANA). Although NYANA was technically a "local partner" of the HIAS resettlement network, the American Jewish community justifiably regarded—and funded—NYANA as a "national" Jewish agency, as NYANA welcomed and integrated nearly half of all Jewish refugees to the United States.

The first decade of the 21st century was very different from the 1990s, however. In the first ten years of the new millennium, HIAS resettled less than 20,000 Jews to the United States, and the majority of these arrived before 2002. Thirty-eight percent (7,600) of the Jewish refugees arriving during the decade were to

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call New York home. Nationally, while HIAS was resettling fewer refugees each year, it also diversified by expanding to serve vulnerable non-Jewish refugee populations. In so doing, HIAS was driven by Jewish values to welcome the stranger, as well as by the need to preserve its role with the Department of State as the national refugee resettlement agency of the Jewish community. HIAS leadership was concerned that, if the agency were to disengage from refugee resettlement, reactivation of the network and of government contacts in a time of need would be difficult or impossible. To ensure that the Jewish community always has the capacity to rescue and resettle Jews who flee persecution, HIAS needed to sustain a viable national refugee resettlement network with sufficient caseload, expertise on refugee-processing issues, and a seat at the table with the U.S. government, the international community, and the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR).

NYANA, in contrast, was unable to transition from massive service provider to small resettlement agency, and it did not survive the decade. NYANA closed its doors in 2008, just shy of its 60th birthday.

By 2007, the last full year of NYANA's operation, New York City was no longer HIAS' largest resettlement site. For many years, due to concerns about the cost of living for new arrivals, the only refugees placed in New York by HIAS were those with family in the New York metropolitan area. Refugees without relatives in the United States—so-called free-cases—were resettled elsewhere. While two-thirds of HIAS' national caseload was now non-Jewish (up from less than 2% in the previous decade), very few of these non-Jewish refugees had family in New York. Consequently, NYANA's resettlement caseload remained overwhelmingly Jewish, even after Jews became a minority among the refugees resettled through HIAS.

The scale of Jewish resettlement had become much smaller, but the need to maintain a Jewish resettlement presence in New York City was still clear. At the time NYANA closed, though New York was no longer HIAS' largest resettlement site, it was still welcoming more *Jewish* refugees—from the former Soviet Union and Iran—than any other city in the United States. To lose the presence of a HIAS affiliate in New York would have meant that the American Jewish community would have to rely on the kindness of other religious denominations and nonsectarian agencies to welcome Jews to New York. This would send the wrong message for those Jews who had been forcibly deprived of their culture and their faith in the Old Country (country of origin) as well as for those who had clung to their religion and customs in the face of great adversity. The age of huddled masses of Jews fleeing from their homelands to New York harbor may have passed, but New York still had the largest concentration of Jews in the world outside of Israel. It was clear New York would continue to need a Jewish agency to reunite migrants with their families in New York for decades to come.

Enter F·E·G·S, which in partnership with UJA-Federation of New York, is the largest nonprofit health and human services agency in the United States. F·E·G·S was thus well-positioned to assume NYANA's role as HIAS' New York affiliate, to continue the HIAS and NYANA tradition of welcoming Jewish refugees to New York, and helping them get on their own feet and on the path toward American citizenship. In 2008, with the support of the United Jewish Communi-

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ties (now the Jewish Federations of North America [JFNA]), F·E·G·S assumed this important new role, creating a "NYANA Division" to resettle refugees in New York.

F·E·G·S did not have to wait long to prove the importance for the American Jewish community (as embodied by the JFNA and UJA-Federation of New York) of continuing the work of NYANA. On February 22, 2010, before the Jewish Council on Public Affairs Annual Plenum in Dallas, Anti-Defamation League executive director Abe Foxman remarked that 2009 began with Israel's intervention in Gaza in an effort to stop the onslaught of Qassam missiles from being fired at Israeli civilian populations and ended as "the worst year in global anti-Semitism since the Second World War."

Indeed, in 2009, manifestations of this resurgence of anti-Semitism led many of the last remaining Jews of Yemen to seek to leave the land where they had lived for thousands of years. Some were to join their families in Israel, but others chose to reunite with relatives in the United States. In 2009, NYANA was gone, but the American Jewish community was there to welcome the Yemenites to New York. F·E·G·S, working as part of the HIAS refugee resettlement network, was the connection between the American Jewish community and the newly arrived Yemenite community in Monsey, New York.

EVENTS LEADING TO THE RESETTLEMENT OF YEMENITES IN THE UNITED STATES

Prior to the United Nations' partitioning of Palestine in 1947, Yemen and the port city of Aden (then independent but now part of Yemen), had a Jewish population of more than 50,000, representing an ancient Jewish community with its own special traditions, crafts, and culture—particularly their work as silversmiths and makers of the finest *jambiya* (the curved Yemenite dagger worn by most Yemenite men but that, ironically, Jews in many parts of Yemen were not allowed to carry). The Jewish community of Yemen, it is said, was originally sent there by King Solomon to facilitate the importation of gold and silver to Jerusalem for the construction of the First Temple.

After the partition of Palestine, however, a wave of tragic violence erupted against the Jews in the port city of Aden, leading to the airlifting of 95% of the Jewish community to Israel by 1950 through "Operation Magic Carpet." The remaining Yemenite Jews were concentrated in Sa'ada and Raida, in mountainous northwestern Yemen. Most Yemenite Jews were not able to obtain permission to leave Yemen through the Yemen civil war of 1962, the division of Yemen into two countries, and the reunification in 1990. At that point, Yemen sought to improve relations with the United States and declared that Jews were now free to travel. Subsequently, another 1,200 left, mainly for Israel, leaving a community of less than 500 behind. A few dozen of those, however, in the intervening years came to New York and London to study at *yeshivot* under the sponsorship of *haredi* groups.

In December 2007, the first U.S. Special Envoy to Monitor and Combat Anti-Semitism, Gregg Rickman, traveled on a mission to Yemen to assess the condition of the Jewish community there and to investigate a report of abduction, forced conversion to Islam, and marriage of a young Yemenite woman. He found a government that was taking extraordinary measures in an effort to

protect its Jewish citizenry, but was simply incapable of doing so successfully. The government had virtually no authority in Raida, which was controlled by rebel groups, so Rickman was unable to receive authorization to travel there. He did travel to Sa'ada, but even there heard accounts of how frightened members of the Jewish community were. In February 2007, a note was nailed to the door of a local Jewish family in Sa'ada attributed to Hussein al-Houthi's *Shi-ite* rebel movement Shabab al-Mu'mineen ("The Young Believers"), demanding that the Jews leave within days. Shortly thereafter, the government evacuated a number of families from Sa'ada to safe houses in Sana, but others remained behind, reluctant to abandon their homes. The families met with Rickman and told him that 200 of the remaining 350 Jews of Yemen desperately wanted to leave Yemen for Israel, the United States, or the United Kingdom (largely depending on where they had family ties).

Rickman returned to the United States convinced that it had to assist those who wanted to leave. Rickman contacted HIAS' professional leadership, which then spent the 2007–2008 winter break between Chanukah and New Year's Day brainstorming on the options available to the community, and produced an options paper for Rickman. Shortly thereafter, Rickman convened a meeting in his office—housed in the Department of State Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights and Labor (DRL)—with the United Jewish Organizations of Williamsburg (UJO), HIAS, and the State Department Bureau of Population, Refugees and Migration (PRM). The options presented were discussed. Shortly thereafter, PRM assured HIAS that it would facilitate access to the U.S. Refugee Program for the Jews of Yemen who would step forward to express an interest in being resettled to the United States. Throughout 2008, not a single Yemenite Jew expressed such an interest. They all seemed to have a renewed commitment to maintaining their ancient community in its home, in the face of great adversity.

Then, on December 11, 2008, Moshe al-Nahari, a religious leader of the Raida Jewish community, was murdered after a deranged former pilot of the Yemeni Air Force, Abdul-Aziz-al-Abdi, demanded that al-Nahari convert to Islam. Less than two weeks later, the Israeli government launched its forceful intervention in Gaza to defend itself against the recent escalation by Hamas activities firing Qassam rockets at civilian targets in Israel. This conflict sparked an uprising of worldwide violence directed against Jews, including in Yemen, where non-Jewish neighbors assaulted, publicly insulted, and hurled rocks at them. By all accounts, they were afraid to leave their homes, but even their homes were not safe, as a live grenade was lobbed into the home of Said Ben Israel, another Yemenite Jewish leader.

In Washington, HIAS' leadership spent the American holiday season of 2008 much like the holiday season of 2007—discussing with our Jewish colleague agencies, PRM, the U.S. Embassy in Yemen, and Rickman—a George W. Bush appointee who was preparing to leave the State Department as part of the transition to the Obama administration—on how to facilitate the evacuation of the Jews of Yemen. This time, the Yemenite Jews were clear: they were *really* ready to leave.

PRM quickly devised refugee-processing options for those Yemenites who wanted to flee to the United States. While evacuation to processing centers in safe third countries was under consideration, the situation had cooled slightly,

and PRM opted for the "in-country" refugee-processing option. (One of the unique aspects of the U.S. Refugee Program is that it allows the president of the United States to authorize the U.S. Refugee Admissions Program to conduct refugee adjudications for threatened individuals *within* their country of alleged persecution. This option—known as "in-country-processing"—is currently used to process Jews and other religious minorities in the former Soviet Union, as well as individuals with a well-founded fear of persecution in Cuba and Iraq, and in the past has been used to process refugees out of Vietnam and Haiti.)

While major security issues and cultural communication barriers between the Yemenite Jews and the processing teams all posed challenges, refugee interviews with the U.S. government were underway within weeks. Not since the processing of Kosovars out of Macedonia in 1999 has the U.S. Refugee Admissions Program sprung into action so quickly for the processing of a group of more than 100 refugees. Ultimately, 113 refugees—all of whom had relatives in the United States - were approved, having established in their interview that they met the requirement of having a "well founded fear of persecution on account of religion, ethnicity, political opinion, nationality, or membership in a particular social group" in Yemen. The U.S. Refugee Admissions Program (USRAP)—consisting of PRM, the Department of Homeland Security U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS) Refugee Corps, and the Overseas Processing Entity run by the International Catholic Migration Commission—was heroic in its expedited response to the situation faced by the Yemenite Jews, and yet patient in assisting this population with navigating the resettlement process. The USRAP not only managed to swoop into Yemen to conduct the adjudications under very difficult circumstances, but was also very effective in working with major issues concerning obtaining exit permission from the Yemeni government and addressing medical issues that could have prevented some of the refugees from traveling.

Getting the Yemenites processed and approved to travel to the United States as refugees, however, was only the first hurdle in the challenge.

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The Yemenite Jews who applied to migrate to the United States had two clear goals in mind: to reunite with family and to live as observant Jews without fear of persecution. They had no formal education, and most were not even able to read and write in Arabic, the official language of Yemen; they were blacksmiths, cobblers, or carpenters by trade. Yet they all had a strong understanding of the concept of religious freedom and knew that such a concept was a core value of the United States.

Within memory, the U.S. Refugee Admissions Program had not resettled Jews like the Yemenites. Jews from the former Soviet Union were overwhelmingly educated and secular when they arrived in the United States. Iranian Jews tended to be observant, but were also well educated and joining a very well-established and prosperous community in the United States. The Yemenite Jews, however, were unlike either group, in that they were highly observant and had very little education or employable skills, and the Yemenite Jewish community in the United States was small, dispersed and—though still in touch with their traditions—Americanized. It would be the responsibility of the local HIAS affiliate to receive them, ensure that they could find employment and be self-supporting, and live as highly observant Jews.

The resettlement of the Yemenite Jews was not without controversy in the international or American Jewish communities. The controversy was played out in blogs and newspaper articles in the Jewish press. Many expressed the opinion that Israel was better situated to accept and integrate the Yemenite Jews, and complained that among the *haredi* groups anxious to welcome the Yemenites were members of anti-Zionist sects.

Indeed, Israel has decades of experience of successfully welcoming and absorbing tens of thousands of Yemenite Jews, and offers benefits that are far more generous than those of the U.S. Refugee Admissions Program. HIAS—at the request of United Jewish Communities and working closely with the Jewish Agency for Israel (JAFI)—developed fact sheets that objectively demonstrated the more generous benefits provided to *olim* in Israel than to refugees in the United States. The comparison may have helped persuade some Yemenites: according to a press release issued by JAFI on November 26, 2009, approximately the same number of Yemenites who were admitted to the United States as refugees ("nearly 60") made *aliyah* to Israel from Yemen so far that year. Among these were some who were among the 113 originally approved for the U.S. Refugee Admissions Program, but who opted for *aliyah* instead. Ultimately, in 2009, 57 made the journey to join family in the United States.

All of the 57 Yemenite Jews bound for the United States had family in the New York metropolitan area, and the vast majority of these were in Monsey, New York—an enclave of diverse but highly observant Jewish communities in Rockland County. This was the obvious choice for their resettlement. (Many of their family "anchors," however, originally entered the United States on a temporary student visa and did not have authorization to permanently reside in the United States. Consequently, the New York Legal Assistance Group and the HIAS National Jewish Center for Immigrants, Refugees and Integration proffered legal assistance to the U.S. relatives to assist with their own applications for asylum, derivative refugee status, and regularization of legal status in the United States).

In the U.S. Refugee Admissions Program, national voluntary agencies such as HIAS have the responsibility for assigning the arriving refugee families to a local resettlement affiliate such as F·E·G·S, and passing through the State Department's Reception and Placement (R&P) grant to the local affiliate. This is done in this way to ensure that the affiliate furnishes and stocks an appropriate apartment with food and housewares, transports the refugees from the airport to their new home, accompanies them to local doctor appointments, enrolls the children in appropriate schools, provides them with postarrival cultural and employment orientation (usually including English-language instruction), refers them to job placement services so that they can become self-sufficient, while also ensuring that the refugees are accessing any social assistance benefits to which they are entitled (which are generally funded by the Office of Resettlement but administered by the states). With the assistance of a $900 grant per refugee from the Department of State, this is all to be done within the first 90 days after arrival, although the agency–client relationship between resettlement affiliates and refugees generally continues for far longer than 90 days. (After extensive advocacy by HIAS and the other national voluntary agencies, the Reception and Placement Grant since was doubled to $1,800 per refugee by the Department of State in 2010, but this took place after the arrival of the 57 Yemenites in 2009.) The

national agency, such as HIAS, is also responsible for providing technical assistance to the local affiliate and monitoring them to ensure that refugees are receiving the requisite services.

Achieving this in the case of the Yemenites was easier said than done, however. On March 11, 2009, HIAS succeeded in negotiating with the other voluntary agencies to ensure that all of the Yemenites would be "pre-destined to the HIAS Network." (Otherwise the refugees would have likely been dispersed among non-Jewish resettlement agencies across the country.)

Once the cases were "pre-destined" for HIAS, however, significant challenges remained: neither HIAS nor any other voluntary agency had a resettlement site in Rockland County, New York. Consequently, HIAS would have to establish a local resettlement site especially for this population in Monsey. This compounded the challenge and expense of their resettlement, which would already be extraordinary, given the arrangements needed to prepare the Yemenites to enter the workforce, the serious medical issues among the population, and education needs required to maintain their religious traditions while catching up after the lack of any formal educational opportunities in Yemen. It was clear that the federal dollars available for their resettlement, at $900 per head, would not come close to meeting the expenses associated with the resettlement of this population for the first 90 days after their arrival in the United States, and that other government services and assistance would fall far short of meeting their needs for the first year or two. The Jewish community clearly would have to step up to the plate to ensure that the needs of the Yemenite Jews would be met and that, for the first time in their lives, they would be able to live as Jews with dignity and without fear.

While F·E·G·S—in cooperation with the United Jewish Organizations of Williamsburg—stepped forward to break ground and open a new resettlement site in Monsey, the UJC recognized that the resettlement of the Yemenites was a *national* challenge for the American Jewish community; that is, a national initiative that would occur in Rockland County, New York.

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On May 8, 2009, UJC sent out an "Emergency Appeal to Aid Relocation of Yemenite Jews," to raise $800,000 to assist with the estimated $2 million to cover the first six months of costs associated with the resettlement of the Jews of Yemen to Rockland County. Contributions flowed from local Jewish federations and HIAS—recognizing the unique challenges of resettling this population—contributed cash to the effort as well.

The first Yemenite refugee family arrived in Monsey on July 7, 2009, with a total of 57 arriving over the course of 2009, plus their immediate family members who were already in the United States or the United Kingdom: 4 elderly, 22 adults under 65, 26 school-aged children, and 15 preschoolers. Eighteen more are expected in 2010. The F·E·G·S–UJO partnership has all the Yemenite children enrolled in schools, who are enthusiastic about receiving a formal education for the first time and express disappointment when school is not in session. The adult men and women—including the elderly—have demonstrated great commitment to attending English as a Second Language classes. They are also attending community orientation sessions, where they are learning to navigate public transportation, personal financial management, the American health care system, obtaining a green card, applying for a driver's license, and preparing to enter the

workforce. F·E·G·S is working with the Yemenites to address the many serious healthcare issues that have gone unaddressed in Yemen. The immediate task before F·E·G·S—in addition to preparing for the 18 new arrivals expected—is getting each of the adults on the road to self-sufficiency. The task will not be easy for the Yemenites, who arrived in the United States with high expectations but without literacy, education, or employable skills. F·E·G·S is up to the task though, as HIAS' refugee resettlement partner in the metropolis with the second largest Jewish population in the world and the largest outside of Israel.

Particularly telling is the reaction of the most elderly of the Yemenite refugees, who is nearly 80 years old. He has repeatedly requested an audience with President Obama to personally thank him for bringing him to a country where he does not have to live in fear. And F·E·G·S' manager of the Yemenite resettlement program was brought to tears when she witnessed the stunned reaction of an elderly Yemenite woman when she saw the new *mezuzah* on the outside of her doorframe in Monsey. The woman expressed concern that the *mezuzah* would not be safe on the outside of her house since in Yemen *mezuzot* were kept only indoors because otherwise they would be stolen or defaced. The Yemenite woman was rendered speechless when the caseworker explained to her that it was completely safe in Monsey to leave your *mezuzah* on the outside of the house.

To refer back to the remarks of Abe Foxman, anti-Semitism is far from dead in the world. The Yemenite Jews are sadly not going to be the last Jewish community to decide they must flee their homes in the Diaspora and make *aliyah* to Israel or to join family in New York or elsewhere. HIAS and the American Jewish community are committed to rescuing and resettling refugees of all faiths and ethnicities, in fulfillment of the *mitzvah* to welcome the stranger and the teaching that to save one life is to save the world. At the same time, however, the American Jewish community and HIAS are committed to ensuring that we will always be there to welcome our Jewish brothers and sisters to the United States, and not delegate that task to other faiths, nonsectarian agencies, or the government. To do this, we need a refugee resettlement agency in New York.

To do this, we need F·E·G·S.

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