

Canada accepts fewer Israeli refugee claims, more Palestinians

By [Ron Csillag](#)

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A sign at Pearson airport in Toronto welcoming visitors to Canada. (Cohen.Canada/flickr/CC BY-SA 2.0)

Canada continued to accept refugees from Israel last year, but overall numbers remain low. However, the number of cases in which asylum was granted to people from “Palestine” increased dramatically last year over the year before.

In 2017, the Immigration and Refugee Board (IRB) – which considers Palestine to be a separate category – granted refugee status to just 12 claimants from Israel, out of 34 cases that were finalized. The IRB denied 12 applications, 10 claims were withdrawn and a further 111 cases were still pending.

The numbers more or less mirror those from 2016, when the IRB heard 36 refugee claims from Israel and approved 15 of them. It rejected 16 applications for asylum.

It’s a far cry from the early 1990s, when hundreds of claimants from Israel were accepted. They were mainly filed by immigrants from the former Soviet Union who went to the Jewish state under the Law

of Return and then came to Canada to claim they had been persecuted in Israel because of mixed marriages or questionable status as Jews.

The issue became a sore point between Canada and Israel, which maintained it did not produce refugees.

Since 1999, Canada has accepted 884 refugee claims from Israel, meaning applicants had proved a well-founded fear of persecution if they were returned.

Claims over the past decade have come mostly from Arab citizens of Israel, said Edward Corrigan, a London, Ont.-based immigration lawyer who has represented claimants from both Israel and Palestine.

The board does not give reasons for its decisions. But Corrigan said there are a number of reasons why the IRB would accept a claim from Israel, including a situation in which a Muslim woman has married a Christian man.

“There would be little or no opportunity from Israeli authorities to protect them,” Corrigan said. In fact, Israel might try to get them to become informants, he added.

Other successful claims from Israel have come from gay Arab men and women, messianic Jews – those who say they are Jewish but believe Jesus Christ is their saviour – and, in one case, a Russian Jew who came under the Law of Return and then converted to Christianity because his wife was Christian, and he began to proselytize.

“Israeli authorities frown on that,” Corrigan said.

Asked whether religious friction constitutes the sort of persecution that compels someone to seek asylum elsewhere, Corrigan said, “You don’t have to be killed to be a refugee. If someone is going to throw you in jail or beat you up and the authorities aren’t interested in protecting you, that’s enough to sustain a refugee claim.”

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From the “Palestine” category, which encompasses Gaza, the West Bank, east Jerusalem and Palestinians who reside elsewhere, the IRB finalized 406 refugee claims last year.

It granted asylum to 307 of them and rejected 88, for an overall acceptance rate of 75 per cent. A further 546 cases were pending at year’s end.

The numbers were up sharply from 2016, when the board heard 153 claims from Palestine, accepted 123 of them and denied 24.

Overall, Palestinians can face persecution from the Israeli army, Jewish settlers, the Palestinian Authority in the West Bank or Hamas in Gaza, Corrigan said.

Claims for asylum also come from gay men and women who face grave dangers, both religious and cultural, in their societies, and can’t get protection from Israel.

In these cases, too, Israel will often try and turn them into informants, Corrigan said. “So they end up leaving. They don’t want to become an informant for the Israeli authorities, which would increase their risk factors, and they certainly don’t want to be killed or beaten up or attacked because they are gay.”

He’s also handled claims from young women who fled after refusing to enter into arranged marriages.

Corrigan said he has a 100 per cent success rate in refugee claims from Gaza because applicants fear Hamas, which Canada considers to be a terrorist organization.

In the West Bank, he said, the situation is “much more complex. There are different agents of persecution.”