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IRREGULAR MIGRATION TO ISRAEL: THE SOCIOPOLITICAL PERSPECTIVE

Haim Yacobi

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Irregular Migration to Israel:
The sociopolitical Perspective

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This publication is part of a series of papers on the theme of Irregular Migration written in the framework of the CARIM project and presented at a meeting organised by CARIM in Florence: "Irregular Migration into and through Southern and Eastern Mediterranean Countries" (6 - 8 July 2008).

These papers will also be discussed in another meeting between Policy Makers and Experts on the same topic (25 - 27 January 2009). The results of these discussions will be published separately. The entire set of papers on Irregular Migration are available at the following address: <http://www.carim.org/ql/IrregularMigration>.

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The Euro-Mediterranean Consortium for Applied Research on International Migration (CARIM) was created in February 2004 and has been financed by the European Commission. Until January 2007, it referred to part C - “*cooperation related to the social integration of immigrants issue, migration and free circulation of persons*” of the MEDA programme, i.e. the main financial instrument of the European Union to establish the Euro-Mediterranean Partnership. Since February 2007, CARIM has been funded as part of the AENEAS programme for technical and financial assistance to third countries in the areas of migration and asylum. The latter programme establishes a link between the external objectives of the European Union’s migration policy and its development policy. AENEAS aims at providing third countries with the assistance necessary to achieve, at different levels, a better management of migrant flows.

Within this framework, CARIM aims, in an academic perspective, to observe, analyse, and predict migration in the North African and the Eastern Mediterranean Region (hereafter Region).

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The CARIM carries out the following activities:

- Mediterranean migration database;
- Research and publications;
- Meetings of academics;
- Meetings between experts and policy makers;
- Early warning system.

The activities of CARIM cover three aspects of international migration in the Region: economic and demographic, legal, and socio-political.

Results of the above activities are made available for public consultation through the website of the project: www.carim.org

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Abstract

This paper focuses on socio-political dynamics in Israel in relation to increases in the irregular migration of non-Jewish workers, as well as refugees and asylum seekers from Africa. The main argument outlined here is that despite the significant ethnocentric ideologies and territorial controls that characterise Israel, the country is witnessing a significant influx of non-Jewish migrants, asylum seekers and refugees. The theoretical insight that stems from this paper is that the irregular migration of “foreigners” to Israel challenges Israeli politics of identity and attitudes towards the “Other”, whilst simultaneously unveiling complexity in Israel's ethno-national identity and collective history.

Résumé

La présente note de synthèse met en exergue les dynamiques sociopolitiques de la migration irrégulière en Israël et se concentre sur la migration irrégulière des travailleurs non juifs et des réfugiés et demandeurs d'asile africains. L'argument principal est que malgré les idéologies ethnocentriques caractérisant l'Etat Israélien et le contrôle territorial exercé par l'Etat, l'Israël assiste à l'irruption d'un nouveau phénomène migratoire illustré par les flux importants de migrants non juifs et de réfugiés.

La note démontre que, sur le plan théorique, l'émigration irrégulière des « Etrangers » vers l'Israël met en question la politique israélienne de l'identité et la perception de « l'autre » tout en révélant la complexité de l'identité israélienne ethno nationale et son histoire collective.

A. Introduction

"Strangers are not a modern invention – but strangers who remain strangers for a long time to come, even in perpetuity, are" (Bauman, 2003, 6).

Jewish immigration is the keystone of Israeli national identity and has been supported by the Israeli Law of Nationality since 1952, and, since 1950, by the Law of Return. The latter, based on the *jus sanguinis* principle, gives to Jews everywhere the right to immigrate to Israel, while the former grants them, almost automatically, Israeli nationality (see: www.knesset.gov.il). However, during the last two decades Israeli migration patterns have come to include a growing number of non-Jewish migrants including 250,000 labour migrants and around 8,000 African refugees and asylum seekers. Both groups can be categorized as irregular migrants, i.e. individuals that contradict the state's interests in relation to its demographic agenda and sovereignty. Indeed, irregularity is considered, socially speaking, as the uninvited presence of migrants in the state's territory.

However, by analysing Israeli socio-political dynamics in relation to the increasing irregular migration of non-Jewish, often undocumented workers as well as refugees and asylum seekers from Africa, the paper aims to show that the phenomenon of irregular migration is, in reality, more complex, than it appears. Thus, despite the strong ethnocentric ideologies that characterise the country's political, social and cultural realities, Israel is witnessing an influx of irregular migrants.

On an analytical level, the paper suggests that the irregular migration of "strangers" to Israel challenges Israel's politics of identity and attitudes towards the "Other", whilst simultaneously revealing the complexity of Israel's ethno-national identity, territoriality and collective history. Additionally, the paper points to the growing influence of civil society as the state's responsibility for marginal, yet increasingly large groups, such as non-Jewish workers and refugees, lapses.

The lack of precise and acceptable formal data reflects the confusion, and often denial, concerning irregular migration to Israel. Hence, the data in this paper is based partly on media coverage and information from NGOs.

B. Foreign Workers or Labour Migrants?

"Soon foreign workers began to bring their own problems with them. As yet, these are relatively modest. Thai workers are eating up Israel's wildlife and stray cats and dogs, according to reports. Workers of European origin frequently get drunk. Undoubtedly both help support Israel's prostitution industry which also brings in foreign workers – Russian non-Jews – imported for the trade. None of this is unique to Israel, rather it is a common feature of globalisation and has hit Israel in the same way that globalisation is affecting other aspects of Israel's economy and society" (Elazar in: www.jcpa.org/dje/articles2/foreignwork.htm 2006).

A significant flow of non-Jewish labour migrants started arriving legally in Israel in the 1990s. Non-Jewish labour migrants were initially brought to Israel following a government decision in 1993 to replace Palestinian workers from the Occupied Territories: the entry of Palestinian workers, who formed a large proportion of the Israeli labour force, had been restricted after the outbreak of the first Palestinian *Intifada* in 1987 (Semyonov and Lewin-Epstein, 1987). It should also be noted that, from an economic point of view, the salary cost to an employer for a Palestinian worker is 30-40 percent higher than the salary cost for a foreign worker (Ellman and Laacher, 2003): there was then a possible additional economic motive.

In Israel, as in other countries, a large proportion of the first wave of workers came from the Third World and Eastern Europe. They arrived from Romania (the construction industry), Thailand

(agriculture) and the Philippines (geriatric care, nursing and domestic services (Schammah Gesser et al, 2000). According to available data, this pattern is still noticeable: foreign workers in Israel are predominantly from Thailand (28 percent); the Philippines (20 percent); FSU (13 percent); China (10 percent); Nepal (9 percent); and Romania (8 percent). Only an insignificant minority (1 percent) is from the USA, Germany and UK (Israeli Central Bureau of Statistics, 2006).

Beyond the economic reasons for letting these workers enter Israel, the decision to allow a massive migration of non-Jewish workers to Israel is also significant in that it contrasts, ideologically, with the Israeli Law of Nationality, which came into force in 1952 and that has been buttressed by the Law of Return since 1950. The latter, based on the *jus sanguinis* principle, gives Jews – and only Jews – everywhere the right to immigrate, while the former grants them, almost automatically, Israeli nationality (see: www.knesset.gov.il). In the Israeli Law of Return, the term used for Jewish immigrants (*oleh*, singular, and *olim*, plural) is derived from the Biblical Hebrew "to arise, come up", referring to immigration specifically to the Land of Israel (Alexander, undated document). The *olim* are automatically granted citizenship upon their arrival, including immediate voting rights.

Furthermore, the official status of *olim* lasts several years from the date of arrival and entitles them to full citizenship rights as well as a "basket" of absorption support such as rental subsidies, free Hebrew courses and subsidised mortgages. In contrast, non-Jews who wish to settle in Israel find it almost impossible to obtain citizenship or even permanent resident status, unless they marry an Israeli and/or convert to Judaism. Until the 1990s there were indeed almost no non-Jewish immigrants to Israel and thus this debate is central to the discourse of identity in the Israeli context, as discussed in my previous report to CARIM (Yacobi, 2008). It is only with this situation in mind that one can also understand the terminology attached to the non-Jewish workers. During the first period of their influx to Israel the most common label was *ovdim zarim*, i.e. "foreign workers" in Hebrew, which is also used in official documents. Interestingly enough, the term *ovdim zarim* contains biblical connotations of paganism (*avoda zara*) (Kemp et al. 2000). This terminology, I would suggest, reflects Israeli government policy in emphasising the temporality of "the phenomenon" (Fenster and Yacobi, 2005) and expresses a specific policy towards the labour migrants (Schnell and Alexander, 2002).

From a geographical point of view, and as seen in other cities such as Paris, Amsterdam, Barcelona, Brussels and Frankfurt (Schnell and Alexander 2002; Sassen 1994; 1998; Castells 1997; Moulaert et al. 2003), labour migrants tend to concentrate in downtown areas where rental prices are relatively low. In the Israeli context, this phenomenon has been widely studied and analysed in relation to Tel Aviv-Jaffa, and particularly the Central Bus Station area. Since 1996, this area has offered not only access to informal employment, transportation and housing, but also a relatively liberal urban policy towards illegal working migrants (Kemp and Reichman 2004; Fenster and Yacobi 2005). As a result of the extensive presence of non-Jewish workers in the Central Bus Station area, the urban landscape and economy there changed over the past decade, offering most of the daily services needed by workers such as grocery shops (selling African and Asian food and ingredients), pubs and restaurants, laundries, low-price communication technologies and money-changing facilities.

By 2004, labour migrants dominated the area demographically. However, nobody could give an indication of their exact numbers in Israel or in Tel Aviv-Jaffa as at least half of them were unauthorised. According to Israel National Bank data, in the year 2000, there were 113,000 "foreign workers". In 2001, *Kav LaOved* (an NGO that deals with workers' rights) stated that 138,500 labour migrants were authorised and that a further 151,000 were not (www.kavlaoved.org.il). According to a survey carried out in 2002, the labour migrants were the majority of the population in the Central Bus Station area, numbering an estimated 12,500-15,000 inhabitants as compared to 5,000 Israeli inhabitants in the area (Fenster and Yacobi, 2005).

The transformation of Tel Aviv-Jaffa's southern neighbourhoods has started to attract attention; workers from Ghana, Nigeria, Turkey, Romania and the Philippines, among others, are part of the

growing informal economy of the city. The Central Bus Station area has also become a focal point for other labour migrants in Israel, and in the year 2004 there was clear evidence of the growth of commercial, communal, religious and cultural institutions, such as churches and community centers, which served the foreigners' needs. According to a Tel Aviv-Jaffa Municipality Report (2004), in addition to those who resided in the Central Bus Station area, an estimated 50,000 migrants would arrive in the city from other parts of Israel at the weekend in order to participate in social activities and religious ceremonies within their different communities (Fenster and Vigel, 2007).

However, the presence and visibility of migrant workers in Israel were not enough for them to obtain rights. The extension of rights to those groups who fall outside the domain of full citizenship in Israel, including "foreign workers" among others, has only occurred through the pressure of NGOs (for a detailed analysis see: Mundlak, 2007). Among the NGOs that were involved in this struggle, some focused explicitly on the rights of workers. These include *Kav LaOved* (mentioned above), a non-profit NGO committed to protecting the rights of disadvantaged workers employed in Israel or employed by Israelis in the Occupied Territories, including Palestinians, migrant workers, subcontracted workers and new immigrants (www.kavlaoved.org.il); and *The Hot Line for Migrant Workers* (HMW), an NGO established in 1998, dedicated to both the promotion of the rights of undocumented migrant workers/refugees and to the elimination of human trafficking in Israel (www.hotline.org.il). Another NGO, Physicians For Human Rights-Israel, was founded in 1988 with the goal of fighting for human rights, in particular the right to health, in Israel and the Occupied Territories. This organisation initiated an experimental project aimed at outreach to non-Jewish, often undocumented workers with the goal of improving their freedom of access to health services (www.phr.org.il).

In addition, the Tel Aviv-Jaffa municipality, the municipality with the highest number of labour migrants in Israel, has adopted a positive approach to labour migrants, in particular in matters of welfare and health (Alfasi and Fenster, 2004; Fenster and Yacobi, 2005), providing them with basic rights such as education, health and communal services in spite of official government policy to first ignore and later evict them. The municipality's approach acknowledges the basic rights of labour migrants, but provides only partial solutions. One important example of such a solution is the establishment of Mesilah, a special municipal unit that works with labour migrants in Tel Aviv-Jaffa.

The pressure from NGOs has also been reflected in changing terminology. As Fenster and Yacobi (2005) point out, some of the Tel Aviv-Jaffa municipality administrators began to distinguish between "labour migrants" – the professional term for this phenomenon – and "foreign workers". These different terms reflect in many ways the ambiguity, confusion and even embarrassment towards labour migrants that is felt in the city. Nevertheless, the process of obtaining basic rights should not be idealised. To some extent, it could be argued that Tel Aviv-Jaffa has become a "dual city", i.e. an urban arena where greater social polarisation between the rich and poor and between different ethnic and racial groupings exists (Dear and Lucero, 2005:317).

After several years during which the state had no clear and official policy regarding workers, in August 2002, the Israeli Government declared its intention to deport 50,000 foreign workers by the end of 2003. This approach was expressed in a comprehensive and aggressive policy of deportation, accompanied by intensive media propaganda against employing unregistered migrants. Furthermore, an Immigration Authority was established through Government Decision no. 2327 (July 2002) (www.cbs.gov.il) and was allocated a force of 500 police officers who were to carry out deportations of non-registered workers. By July 2003 about 20,000 workers had been deported (www.kavlaoved.org.il) and, according to the special governmental committee dealing with foreign workers in Israel, by the end of 2005, 118,035 workers had left, the majority through deportation and around 40 percent voluntarily (October 12, 2004, www.kavlaoved.org.il). The reduced presence of labour migrants resulting from the deportation policy had an effect on the Central Bus Station area :

their concentration and high visibility in the area were known to the Immigration Authority, and thus it was one of the very first targets for the new deportation policy.

To sum up, it is important to note that today, despite the efforts of the authorities to control the number of workers and their status, i.e. defining them as *foreigners*, 250,000 non-Jewish labour migrants (50,000 of them Palestinians) have migrated to Israel and half of them are undocumented. This is the reason for a new program initiated by Roni Bar-On, Israel's Minister of Finance, to reduce the number of foreign workers. The aim is to reduce the number by 70,000 by 2010 and to deport 125,000 undocumented workers by the end of 2013 (Basok, 2008).

C. Refugees or African Infiltrators?

"When such a large number of refugees enters Israel, all systems are forced to deal with them inside the country," (Avi Dichter, Internal Security Minister, in YNET, 24 February 2008).

The increase in the number of Sudanese crossing the border from Egypt into Israel during the last two years has placed this phenomenon at the very centre of social and political debate in Israel. Refugees from both the Darfur region of western Sudan and southern Sudan have been infiltrating Israel since 2006, but in the summer of 2007 the number of refugees increased significantly, reaching 50 to 100 per day (telephone interview with Eithan Schwartz, spokesperson for the Israeli Coalition for Darfur and Sudan Refugees in Israel, May 3, 2008). According to an Israeli Channel 2 report (23 February, 2008), in 2007, 5,000 Sudanese refugees entered Israel, while in early 2008 the number entering Israel from the southern border had already reached 2,500. Some other sources (Basok, 2008) report 8,000 (approximately 2,400 African asylum-seekers, including about 1,700 Sudanese; 25-30 percent of them come from Darfur and many of the other asylum-seekers come from Eritrea, Ghana, and Kenya).

The Darfur refugees enter Israel via its border with Egypt where they experience "racial slurs that are often thrown at them by the locals. Sudanese walking around Cairo find themselves being called *soda* and *samara* – derogatory words for black – by both adults and children in the street" (Fathi, 2004). Additionally, the Egyptian authorities demonstrate a lack of trust towards Sudanese refugees (Nkrumah, 2003). Yes, there have been certain gestures towards the refugees, such as that of the Mufti, Dr. Ali Gomaa who issued a *fatwa* approving *Sadaqah* for all Sudanese refugees during *Eid Al-Adha* (Azzam, 2006). But coverage in much of the Egyptian media has been characterised by xenophobic statements about refugees and "non-Muslim *kuffar*" who steal Egyptian jobs and who should be sent back where they came from (Azzam, 2006). Such attitudes towards the refugees and the ongoing deterioration of their socio-economic and health conditions seems to be the main reason why Sudanese refugees have been motivated to relocate to Israel. Moreover, as reported by Nkrumah (2007a), the December 2005 Mustafa Mahmoud Mosque incident, in which the Egyptian police violently cleared a garden square with an encampment of protesting Sudanese refugees, killing many in the process, has had a negative impact on the refugees' view of Egypt. And, in fact, the numbers of Sudanese seeking to cross into Israel rose dramatically after the incident (Nkrumah, 2007a).

The border passage starts with a long journey over the Sinai Desert towards Israel. In order to undertake this journey, the refugees pay Bedouin smugglers hundreds of dollars and risk being caught by Egyptian border patrols. Even when the refugees manage to cross the border, they face another problem: the Sudanese government has consistently refused to open diplomatic relations with Israel, and it automatically charges any Sudanese national who sets foot in Israel with high treason.

This extensive human trafficking has taken the Israeli and Egyptian authorities by surprise. When Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Olmert visited Sharm El-Sheikh in June 2007 to discuss the Palestinian-Israeli Peace Process, he also emphasised the need for the repatriation of Sudanese refugees in Israel, many of whom are in Israeli jails. The Israelis apparently wanted assurances from Egypt that the

Sudanese refugees would not be deported to Sudan upon their return to Egypt. At the end of his meeting with Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak, Olmert announced that Egypt had guaranteed not to deport any returning Sudanese refugees. Yet as Nkrumah (2007b) reports, Egyptian officials declined to comment, suggesting that the subject is so sensitive that it has received little coverage in the Egyptian press beyond occasional reports of Sudanese refugees being caught illegally trying to cross the border into Israel.

Until the beginning of 2008, the state of Israel had no clear policy on how to deal with the increasing flow of refugees that included not just Sudanese but also Eritrean refugees and others. Its main policy focused on deportation and attempts to prevent refugees crossing the border, such as the case of 48 Africans, most of them Darfurians, who were deported on August 18, 2007 from Israel back across the Egyptian border (Kershner, 2007). It was a certainty that those refugees who were forced to return to Egypt would be brutally treated and so there has been increasing pressure on Israel from different Israeli NGOs and human-rights organisations, including various civil society organisations and movements dealing with human rights. The Israeli Hotline for Migrant Workers, for example, charged Israel with violating the provision of the Geneva Convention concerning a government's obligation toward refugees from an enemy state. The African Refugees Development Center, which was established in 2003 by an Ethiopian refugee who received political asylum in Israel, and some other initiatives such as those of the Kibbutz and youth movements, have organised different actions in support of the African refugees. During 2007 an inter-organisational coalition was established to create a network and increase cooperation and the consolidation of agreed upon policies.

Interestingly enough, one of the main discourses that accompanied the campaign against the deportation of the refugees focused on the holocaust: it was pointed out that it was the Jewish people who needed shelter and protection after the Second World War. The Jewish historical experience and collective memory became a convincing tool in the public sphere as noted, for example, by Yad Vashem chairman, Avner Shalev, who said: "we cannot stand by as refugees from genocide in Darfur are knocking on our doors" (in Patience, 2007). The holocaust discourse was also in the background on September 4, 2007, when the Israeli Minister of Interior Affairs, Meir Sheetrit, announced that Israel intended to grant citizenship to several hundred refugees from Darfur. The decision was widely praised in Israel and 63 Members of the Knesset from both the right and left had signed a petition demanding that the Darfurians not be deported. However, this gesture was also a message to the refugees that any further border crossings would be considered illegal and that all migrants would be sent back to Egypt under the terms of an agreement with the Egyptian authorities (Kreshner, 2007).

The holocaust discourse is still central in relation to the African refugees in Israel. Just before the last Jewish holiday of Passover a group of African refugees volunteered to help elderly holocaust survivors with cleaning, painting and renovating their flats. This event was covered by the Israeli media, emphasising the common fate of both Jewish and African refugees. Also, a *Seder* (the Jewish ceremony on Passover that symbolises the move of the Jewish people from slavery to independence) was organised with the participation of 200 African refugees in Tel Aviv.

Despite the vague policy of the Israeli government, migration to Israel is perceived as a reasonable solution for the refugees that make it to the country safely. Upon arrival they are sheltered in the temporary caravan park at Ketziot (a jail for Palestinian prisoners) or are taken in by Israeli families or *kibbutzim*. Various possible plans have been suggested, including the gradual replacement of some of Israel's non-Jewish labour migrants and undocumented workers with refugees (Gordon, 2007). The *kibbutzim* have already taken in some refugees, who will be allowed to stay to live and work.

According to Wurgaft (Haaretz, January 8, 2008) 100 refugees from Eritrea received work permits from the Interior Ministry. They are the first of almost 1,000 refugees who will be given such permits in the near future. The permits are being awarded following a special decision by Interior Minister Meir Sheetrit and the head of the Population Administration. Yossi Edelstein, director of the

Population Administration's Department of Aliens, said that "the decision stems from humanitarian considerations in light of the United Nations' request that the Eritreans not be returned to their country, due to severe infractions of human rights there." The Interior Ministry views the six-month work permit as an interim solution, providing permits first to refugees living in shelters in south Tel Aviv, to allow them to move out and make room for those now housed in Ketziot Prison.

However, the situation of the African refugees in Israel is far from ideal and the Israeli authorities play a double game. On the one hand, they aim to control the infiltration of the refugees from the Egyptian border, while on the other hand they withdraw from any long-term responsibility for those refugees that get through. This also resulted in a Sudanese asylum seeker being shot to death on 20 June, 2006 as he was trying to sneak across the Egyptian border into Israel, as verified by the IDF spokesperson's office. The State of Israel applies the Infiltration Act from the 1950s to the asylum seekers, allowing them to be imprisoned for an indefinite period without judicial review. An additional example for this argument is the way in which African refugees are released from Ketziot and sent to Tel Aviv on buses, with no one waiting for them to provide support. This has created a situation where one thousand African refugees are staying in shelters in southern Tel Aviv in unacceptable conditions, conditions that have resulted in severe illnesses (Haaretz, February 17, 2008).

Indeed, as with the case of non-Jewish workers, the "refugee problem" has become a municipal concern. The only state presence is that of the Immigration Police, which, for example, on February 25, 2008 entered some of the shelters in Tel Aviv where hundreds of African refugees had found protection. 200 refugees and asylum seekers from Eritrea, Sudan and the Ivory Coast were arrested, among them twenty women, even though most of them had protection documents from the UN as well as work permits issued by the Israeli Ministry of Interior.

Israeli public discourse is concerned with the different categories of African refugees; Darfurians, asylum seekers, infiltrators, "just Sudanese", Eritreans and Africans are but a few of the definitions used. The exact number of asylum seekers in Israel is unknown: neither the United Nations nor the government publishes data regarding the number or the percentages involved. During 2002-3, Physicians for Human Rights conducted an in-depth survey regarding the number of asylum seekers and refugees, and they made the subject one of their highest priorities with regard to the health rights of these people. In their report (www.phr.org.il/phr), they stated that "the most important subject in the context of health rights is the condition of those seeking asylum and awaiting a decision regarding their cases. These people are supposed to be "protected", but in Israel this "protection" is very limited: it is forbidden to deport them, and recently, work permits have been allowed. The very ill, elderly, those in need of assistance, torture victims – all of these have no protection and no governmental services are offered to them in Israel."

D. Discussion: "smart fence" needed

"I hope that people who cross into Israel illegally are not given permission by the courts to stay. Most of those arriving are migrant workers and we all know what the social implications would be if we allowed such people and their children to remain" (PM Ehud Olmert in: Weiss, September 23, 2007).

What are the "social implications" that Israel's PM, Ehud Olmert, refers to in the above citation? This question, I would suggest, encapsulates the nexus between the politics of identity and the geopolitics of fear that are at the core of this report. As this paper has tried to show, a new ethnic and racial human landscape in Israel has arisen. This process involves both formal policy and cultural discourse rooted in the specific and local Israeli context, framed by the powerful logics of ethnic dominance (and global capital in the case of non-Jewish labour migrants) as well as partial commitment to universal norms. Indeed, one can point to a tension between the "necessity" of integrating with the global economy, on the one hand, and the "necessity" of controlling the ethno-demographic balance, on the other – a

tension that undermines the ethnocentric vector. Indeed, irregular migration and the flow of refugees from Africa both affect the demographic diversity of Israel, despite the dominance of one ethn-national group. However, the respect of basic rights such as the right to health is still based on an inequality in status and an ethnically-based distribution of resources.

As we have seen, though the space and movement of people are both considered to be controlled by state mechanisms, daily life for the irregular working migrants and the refugees is politicised; these people, despite their illegal status, act through initiatives reflecting their personal and social needs that challenge the interests of those in power. This is expressed not solely in their motivation to cross borders, but also in their ability to organise themselves as a group with collective interests in cooperation with human-rights NGOs in Israel.

What then is the reaction of the authorities to the infiltration of irregular migrants, which has occurred in recent years in spite of their efforts to control it? A media report on a discussion attended by Defense Minister Ehud Barak, Justice Minister Daniel Friedmann, Social Affairs Minister Issac Herzog, Foreign Ministry and Social Affairs Ministry representatives, and Health Minister Yacov Ben-Yizri, as well as Internal Security Minister Avi Dichter, expresses the confusion that arises over the situation. The Internal Security Minister argued that the IDF is unsuccessful in preventing the refugees from entering Israel, but that it is necessary to make sure that each refugee discovered is returned to Egypt immediately since “the solution must be that we arrest them on the border with Egypt and immediately return them. If we fail to deal with them on the border, immediately after they enter, it will be complicated.” (Avi Dichter in YNET 24 February 2008). Indeed, according to Dichter, Israel's alternatives are either imprisonment or expulsion. However, the deportation of foreign nationals is complex, as a refugee cannot be put on a plane back to his homeland without a passport.

While Dichter focuses on the question of what to do with those that have already infiltrated into Israel, Defense Minister Barak focused during this meeting on the construction of a fence on the Egyptian border, and called on the Finance Ministry to transfer the necessary funding for the construction of this 132-mile “smart fence” that is “needed”. This approach, I would suggest, is incidentally – yet discursively connected – to the political technologies that have characterised Israel in the last few years. In other words, the pressure to construct the “smart fence” between Israel and Egypt is linked to two parallel events of significance that occurred in the summer of 2002. The first was the establishment of the Immigration Authority, which aimed to prevent the entry of new foreign workers into Israel and to deport those working illegally. The second, following renewed and continuing violence between Israel and the Palestinians, was the construction by the Israeli government of a security barrier separating Israel from large sections of the West Bank, including the East Jerusalem area.

In this vein of political thinking, “walling” has become the solution for dealing with the “foreign workers problem” and the “African problem” in Israel. The demand for surveillance technologies to combat the infiltration of irregular migrants as part of the emerging discourse of “walling” and separation in Israel expresses the persistent concern of the Israeli authorities over “demographic engineering”.

The politics of fear is elusive on one hand but significant on the other – that is, it is linked to the fear and anxiety raised when the “Other” is present. The expression of these concerns within politics is considered unacceptable since they are perceived as “emotional” and “irrational.” Yet, the fear of the Other is a central component in the discourse of politics (Sandercock 2002; 2003; Bauman 2003). Furthermore, the presence of fear is not a simplistic reflection of social reality but rather is itself a mechanism that produces “reality” – one that is mediated through discourses of fear, hygiene, and order (Sandercock 2003:123). To some extent, irregular migration as discussed in this paper is a good example of the way in which the discourse of fear focuses on the “what” and “whom” we should be afraid of. From this perspective, the demand for control and protection appears to produce a space that is aestheticised, as Sharon Zukin suggests (1995), creating a more “ordered” geopolitical context.

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