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# Israeli Immigration: An Analysis

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**Abstract:**

Israel is one of the most unique sociological experiments of immigration and assimilation in the modern world. Since its formation in 1948, Israel has depended on immigration of the Jewish Diaspora for nearly its entire population and continues to grant automatic citizenship to Jews hailing from all countries of the globe. The country has an official policy of assimilation and does not recognize ethnic differences among Jews. Such a situation has made Israel one of the most culturally pro-immigrant countries in the entire world. However, recent influxes of culturally diverse Jewish populations from the former USSR have emigrated to Israel and failed to assimilate to previously accepted cultural norms, thus threatening to challenge Israel's long held policy of assimilation.

This paper seeks to analyze the history of Jewish immigration and assimilation. It also seeks to evaluate the cultural and economic factors that affect perceptions of immigrants by comparing attitudes towards recent immigration from the USSR among various segments of Israeli society, including the Ashkenazi Jews, Mizrahim Jews, and Arab Israelis.

**Introduction**

The State of Israel is one of the most unique sociological experiments of immigration and assimilation to take place in the modern world. Israel is a state composed of nearly 6 million people, mainly first or second generation immigrant Jews, who until the last few decades had previously been spread throughout the world in a Jewish Diaspora that was without a homeland for more than two millennia. These Jews, each having their own unique cultural characteristics gained through thousands of years of assimilation into various countries in the world, came together to form a state roughly the geographic size of New Jersey; a state that was formed on a piece of historic land previously occupied by a foreign people for centuries and surrounded by hostile nations. Israel is, at its core, an immigrant nation built upon the Zionist ideology that it is to serve as the home country for the Jewish Diaspora all over the world. In Israel immigration is not an aspect of statehood, it is the essence of statehood.

In such an unprecedented immigration country, immigration is in fact seen as the “raison de’etre” for Israel (Horowitz, 2005, p. 119). This focus on Israel as a home for Jews around the world leads some Israelis to go so far as claiming that any opposition to “Aliyah,” or “ascension” as Israelis refer to immigration to Israel, is seen as “tantamount to rejecting the fact of Israel’s existence” (Al Haj, 2003, p. 187). Such extreme Zionist ideology has led Israel to become one of the most overwhelmingly pro-immigrant cultures in the world. However, although uniquely supportive of immigrants in many respects, Israel is a complex nation composed of competing ethnic and socio-economic groups which must be considered in order to provide a complete understanding of Israeli views towards immigrants. Further analysis of the attitudes of these groups betrays both support and criticisms based upon cultural and, perhaps more importantly, economic differences between these groups.

### **History of Israeli Immigration**

The history of Israel is a tale of immigration dating back thousands of years. Although a Jewish presence existed in the area of Palestine for centuries, it was not until the late 19<sup>th</sup> century that Jewish migration to the Yishuv (Jewish community in Palestine) became relatively widespread. The First Aliyah lasted from 1882-1903, a time where 30,000 and 40,000 Jews (mostly from Russia) immigrated to Eretz-Israel. The Second Aliyah lasted from 1904-1914 and brought an additional 40,000 Jews from Eastern Europe to Eretz-Israel (Cohen, 1986, p. 54). While these large-scale migrations to Palestine increased the geographic and numerical presence of the Jewish Yishuv, anti-Semitism in Europe gave rise to a new political movement known as Zionism, led by Theodor Herzl. Following the blatant anti-Semitism evident in the Dreyfus Affair in

France, many Jews began to cling to the notion that an independent Jewish homeland was the only solution to escape the persecution they faced in Europe and elsewhere.

The Yishuv underwent extreme hardship during the course of World War I, but welcomed the eventual British conquest of Palestine in 1917 and its stated promise of creating a Jewish homeland, as ensured by the Balfour Declaration of November 2, 1917. During the three decades following this declaration, Jewish nationalism grew and organizational forces both within and outside Palestine began to turn the Yishuv into a “state-on-the-way” (Cohen, 1986, p. 5). Amidst this growing move towards Jewish Zionism, Arab nationalism had also risen, creating a climate of violence and danger in the Palestine region. With this fear of Arab reprisals in mind, the British published a White Paper in 1939 that put strict limitations on Jewish migration to the area. This restriction on Jewish immigration came at an exceptionally tragic moment for European Jews, as the forces of Nazism and other anti-Semitic ideologies were sweeping across Europe, leading to the deaths of millions of Jews.

This desperate situation led Jews to feel an unprecedented animosity towards the British prohibitions against immigration. In fact, Jewish immigration was justified as a “moral imperative” by the Revisionist movement and it was stressed by Revisionist ideologue Ze’ev Jabotinsky that Jews must violate the British laws and attack the Empire “wherever it can be attacked” (Naor, 1987, p. 9). The Jewish struggle against British immigration limitations grew to a fever pitch while atrocities against the Jews in Europe continued to increase the urgency of the Jewish desire for a homeland. In light of the Jewish campaign against British rule in Palestine and the post-World War II sympathy

felt for the Jewish survivors of the Holocaust, the United Nations granted approval for the formation of the Jewish state of Israel on May 15, 1948.

On this historic day of modern Israel's birth as a state, The Proclamation of Independence was read by David Ben-Gurion proclaiming its historic rebirth of a nation that "will be open to the immigration of Jews from all countries of their dispersion" and calling out to "Jewish people all over the world to rally to our side in the task of immigration and development" (Litvinoff, 1974, p. 95). Soon after the formation of the state of Israel, Jews world-wide harkened to this call for aliyah to the homeland, bringing hundreds of thousands of Jews from all corners of the globe. Initially most of these Jewish immigrants came from European countries, but soon this wave of immigration began to sweep in from Asian and African countries as well. By 2005, more than six million people, mainly Jews, had come from countries around the world to settle in the state of Israel.

### **Israeli Immigration Policy**

As evidenced by the call for immigration in the very charter of Israel, the Proclamation of Independence, Israel's official policy towards immigration is unique among nations of the world. The primary law that governs immigration of Jews to Israel is known as the Law of Return. This law was first passed in 1950 and entitles "any Jew, except for one who acts against the Jewish people or is a public health or security risk, to settle in Israel" (Horowitz, 2005, p. 118). This law was later clarified and expanded in 1970 to include anyone born to a Jewish mother or converted and also applied to the children and grandchildren of these Jews as well as their spouses. Also, the 1952 Law of Citizenship acknowledges the political and civil rights guaranteed to non-Jewish citizens,

but again stipulates the special guarantee of automatic citizenship to all Jews in the world. In this sense, “Israeli legislation considers Jews throughout the world as citizens, or minimally, potential citizens, of the Jewish state” (Kafekin-Fishman, 2006, p. 69).

With these open policies towards immigration, the Jewish population in Palestine grew from 600,000 in 1948 to more than 1,800,000 in the early 1960’s. Such massive immigration proved to be a major task for the newly formed state to absorb with only limited resources. The new state viewed this immigration as something to be managed and realized that these people “had to be housed, clothed, fed, employed, and taught the lingua franca, Hebrew” (Kafekin-Fishman, 2006, p. 68). More important than these basic physical needs, the policy makers in Israel believed the inculcation of Israeli-Jewish culture was paramount in building together a new, united nation. Thus, massive bureaucracy was formed to ensure education of social norms; and as sociologist Kafekin-Fishman would claim, homogenization to Euro-American ethnocentric values (2006, p. 68). This approach by Israel to create a metaphorical super melting-pot in which the many cultures represented within the Diaspora would be boiled down to a single Euro-American, Jewish culture ensured that ‘immigrants who were not of European origin and the indigenous minority groups who had difficulties in meeting these standards were relegated to “otherness” and “difference”’ (Kafekin-Fishman, 2006, p. 68).

This ethnocentric approach to Israeli absorption of immigrants was largely unchallenged by sociologists of the time, but in recent years the Israeli concept of a melting pot has begun to be viewed as a failure. In his study testing the effectiveness of the melting pot as a model for Israeli immigration, sociologist Ehraim Ya’ar analyzes the cultural differences between the dominant European-American Jews of the Ashkenazim

and the less-dominant Oriental-African Jews of the Mizrahim. In his study he acknowledges that several cultural gaps between the two groups, including age at time of marriage, religiosity, rate of women in the workforce, and other factors, have actually lessened between first and second generation Ashkenazim and Mizrahim. However, he also points out that major gaps in particular areas of culture and socio-economic levels still persist, leading to what many would deem a failure of the melting pot hypothesis. As Ya'ar explains, "the common assessment is that the reasons for the failure of the melting pot lie in the ideology on which the idea was based, in the narrow, ethnocentric attitude of the elites, of the absorbing society in general...and in the errors of the absorption policy itself along with the patronizing and bureaucratic way in which it was carried out" (2005, p. 91).

Furthermore, such an ethnocentric policy that strives to impose a minority's cultural norms on the population of a diverse majority often leads to fractures in society. This was the case in the late 1990's when many newly arrived Ethiopian Jews led violent protests outside an Israeli blood bank that had been secretly discarding the Ethiopians' donated blood. While the Ethiopians reacted particularly harshly to this extreme incident, this display of anger also reflected a deeply-felt rebellion against the cultural inferiority they were made to feel, as displayed in the statement by one protester to the Israeli establishment, "If you stop showing such condescension toward us, we will stop showing such extreme emotion" (Schmemann, 1996, p. 2).

### **Ethnicities within Israel**

Although such extreme confrontations between varying Jewish groups in Israel are exceedingly rare, the truth is that Israel does not contain a monolithic Jewish ethnicity

but is rather composed of a multitude of different ethnicities. In fact, the creation of Israel itself led to a redefinition of ethnicity among Jewish society. Before Israel became a state in 1948 there existed three major ethnic groups within the Jewish community “Oriental Jews, who never left the Middle East and North Africa; Sephardim, whose language and ethnic culture derived from Spain before the 1492 expulsion; and Ashkenazim (originally from central Europe) whose language was Yiddish” (Al Haj, 2003, p. 42). After the formation of Israel, these ethnic groups were reduced to two: simply the European-American Ashkenazim and the Asian-African Mizrahim. While based somewhat on geographic origin, the primary basis of differentiation was cultural. In addition to these two ethnic Jewish groups, Israel is composed of a relatively large Arab population that amounts to nearly twenty percent of the country’s total population. All three of these groups are Israeli by nationality, yet they remain quite different in terms of employment, political views, culture, and socio-economic status.

To fully understand the public attitude towards immigration in Israel one must first understand the ethnic differences by which opinions on immigration are divided. Israel is unique in the fact that its official Zionism ideology recognizes no ethnic divisions among Jews, yet at the same time has structured its society to reflect a clear delineation between these de facto ethnicities. The first and most prominent of these ethnic groups is the Ashkenazim. These Jews have a heritage that can be traced back to central Europe, and includes nearly all of the founding fathers of the modern Jewish state. In this sense, the Ashkenazim were the leaders who created the core values and culture upon which Israeli society was built. Ashkenazim elites controlled the absorption of immigrants through what Al-Haj refers to as the “Modernization-Establishment



Approach” which worked to fully integrate Mizrahim immigrants into Ashkenazim society until there remained no separate sense of group identity (Al Haj, 2003, p. 44).

This ethnocentric approach effectively created an ethnic stratification within Israeli society that maintained Ashkenazim dominance while relegating Mizrahim to the periphery of society, giving rise to a class struggle that “is not simply that of the proletariat, but that of the Mizrahim” (Al Haj, 2003, p. 45). Also in this stratification of ethnicities, the numerically significant indigenous Arab population is relegated to the lowest level of Israeli society, viewed by many as enemies, or at least, enemy sympathizers to the state of Israel. This system of stratification with Ashkenazim being dominant, the Mizrahim being second-class, and the Arabs occupying the lowest status, is reflected in all aspects of society, including education levels, relative political power, and socio-economic status.

### **Israeli Public Opinion Towards Immigration**

Due to the fact that Israel is a state nearly entirely composed of recent immigrants and unique among nations of the world in terms of the high regard with which it holds immigration as an essential function of the state, it is relatively difficult to gauge public opinion towards “immigration” as an abstract term. If such a study were done, it would most assuredly find results indicating near unanimous support for immigration, or Aliyah, to Israel in its conceptual form. A much richer picture of Israeli attitudes towards immigration emerges when reaction to a specific group or instance of immigration is measured. One case of particular interest is the recent phenomenon which occurred during the decade following the collapse of the Soviet Union during which 900,000 Jews from the Former Soviet Union immigrated to Israel, adding about 20% to the Israeli

population. As Gideon Lichfield acknowledges, this is the equivalent of “the United States absorbing France” (2006, p. 1). Such immense immigration by a single group was unprecedented in Israeli history and offered a unique test of the Israeli society’s capacity to absorb such an influx of people and diverse culture. By examining the public opinion towards this influx of Russian immigrants among the three main ethnic groups in Israel, namely the Ashkenazi, Mizrahim, and Arabs, one clearly sees the varying degrees of acceptance and opposition based upon economic and cultural concerns held by each of these ethnicities. While all Jews view Jewish immigration as necessary for the survival of Israel, it must be recognized that “the response of different groups (to Russian immigrants) is affected by their location in the stratification system and the actual or potential effects of immigration on their status and opportunities for mobility” (Al Haj, 2003, p. 183).

As would be expected by this economic model, a study conducted in 2000 found that the group most supportive of the new Jewish immigrants from the Former Soviet Union was the Ashkenazi, and in particular, the secular, highly educated, and wealthy Ashkenazi (Horowitz, 2005, p. 123). The most probable reason for this is that this is the group that feels least threatened by the new Russian immigrants, most notably in terms of economic competition. In fact, many Ashkenazi leaders viewed the arrival of the Russian Jews as a great source of strength for Israel in terms of the new personnel they would provide for its military and the morale boost such a wave of new Jews would bring to the country.

The only opposition by some Ashkenazi elites to the Russian immigrants has developed relatively recently as these veteran Israelis have feared for the maintenance of

the strong Euro-centric culture that they feel is being threatened by the perceived reluctance of the new immigrants to forgo their Russian heritage. The veteran Ashkenazi perceive the Russians' public pride in their Russian heritage as "provocative" and a disrespectful display of "cultural chauvinism" (Al Haj, 2003, p. 185). Such fears by Israeli elites have led to widespread stereotypes that have been perpetrated by the Israeli media, depicting Russian immigrants as criminals and cultural deviants.

While the Ashkenazi attitude towards the new Russian immigrants has been generally positive, with only some opposition to the perceived lack of cultural assimilation of the new immigrants, the attitude towards these immigrants by the Mizrahim Jews has been notably less positive. A study conducted in 1990 found the percentage of Mizrahim Jews who expressed a positive attitude towards the influx of Russian immigrants and stated a willingness to aid new immigrants from the former Soviet Union to be less than half that of the Ashkenazi (Al Haj, 2003, p. 184). Furthermore, this negative reaction increased throughout the decade as more immigrants streamed into Israel, leading to public outcries against the encouragement of this new wave of immigration by some Mizrahim leaders.

This negative attitude among the Mizrahim had three major sources. For one, the Mizrahim feared that "the resources allocated to absorb the mass immigration would come at the expense of the disadvantaged slums in the large cities and development towns populated mainly by the Mizrahim" (Al-Haj, 2003, p. 184). Secondly, most immigrant Russians were willing to take jobs below their education level and therefore, were seen as directly competing with upwardly mobile Mizrahim in the labor market. Thirdly, the wave of immigrants that came from Russia was among the most secular of

Jewish groups to enter Israel, with nearly 30% being non-Jewish, and thus caused a cultural clash of religious views. Such a large influx of secular Jews was seen as an affront to the conservative views of the traditionally highly religious Mizrahim, who advocated that full citizenship rights not be given to many of the non-Jewish Russian immigrants (Horowitz, 2005, p. 123).

Of all the ethnic groups in Israel, the attitude of the Israeli Arabs has been the least positive towards the Russian immigrants. As studies in both 1999 and 2000 have shown, Arabs have consistently displayed the greatest opposition to the recent influx of Jewish immigrants (Horowitz, 2005, p. 123). While Arabs recognize that they have little effect on Israeli immigration policy and thus avoid active opposition, leaders from across the Israeli Arab spectrum have voiced reservations about the massive Russian immigration to Israel. Specific leaders such as Abnaa Al-Balad have gone so far as to circulate a protest petition that was signed by over 4,000 Arabs as well as distribute anti-immigration materials in Arab villages (Al Haj, 2003, p. 187).

As Al Haj maintains, the Arab opposition to the mass immigration of Russians is threefold regarding concerns for “group status, individual risk, and the potential threat to the national cause” (2003, p.186). In terms of group status concerns, the Israeli Arabs worry that their already low status in Israeli society will be pushed even further downward by a massive influx of politically and culturally organized Russian Jews. Furthermore, Israeli Arabs believe their land may be at risk for confiscation to make room for incoming Jewish developments. This fear is also related to the concern Arabs feel—that the new immigrants will increase competition for the low-end jobs that Arabs already have difficulty obtaining amongst Jewish competition. Lastly, the Israeli Arabs

have the added concern that such “a wave of immigration rich in human capital would strengthen the State of Israel” and thus weaken the Arab and Palestinian national cause (Horowitz, 2005, p. 123).

### **Conclusion**

The creation and history of Israel has provided the basis for a uniquely positive cultural view of immigration and immigrants. Indeed, the historical circumstances and the Zionist ideology that served as the foundations for the Jewish state hold that immigration is the essence of Israel, rather than simply an aspect. In such a state, it is easy to recognize that this prominent Jewish culture of shared identity among Jews from around the world provides the driving force behind what can be described as an overwhelmingly positive public attitude towards immigration as an abstract concept. However, it must be recognized that although the official ideology of Israel is uniquely supportive of immigration, Israel has not been unaffected by the ethnic and economic concerns which lead some within Israel’s public to be wary and even hostile to new immigrants. Within Israel the three primary ethnic groups of the Ashkenazi, Mizrahim, and Arabs each share very different roles and status in Israeli society. Thus, the three groups maintain varying views towards recent immigration to the country. While all three ethnic groups express some negative feelings towards the failure of full cultural assimilation among recent immigrants, it is the economic concerns held by the Mizrahim Jews and Israeli Arabs over increased labor competition at the low-levels of Israeli society that has given rise to the most negative public attitude towards immigration. Such evidence leads to the conclusion that while the cultural climate drives the widespread positive view of immigration on a theoretical level, in practical terms,

economic status provides the best explanation for public attitudes towards immigration to Israel.

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