

# Zionism, colonization, settlement, occupation

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Zionism, the movement for the national renaissance and political independence of the Jewish People in the Land of Israel (Eretz Yisrael/Palestine), brought together two major migratory dynamics taking place in different regions of the world in the wake of the 20th century, Europe and the Middle East, fatefully linking them till the present. The history of Zionism, both as a political project based on *aliyah* (literally “ascent,” Jewish immigration) and settlement in the Jew’s historical homeland, and a co-protagonist in the Palestinian–Israeli national struggle over the land, bears evidence to the fact that migrations are more than the simple outcome of individuals in search of better opportunities or their random movement in space. Rather, they lie at the intersection of complex processes that make the bulk of the history of human migration.

Zionism was one of several contending solutions proposed to address what became to be regarded as Europe’s “Jewish problem.” The Zionist option emerged out of the discrimination and social exclusion of Eastern European Jews, who made up 75 percent of the world’s eight million Jews in the 1880s, which culminated in a wave of anti-Semitic *pogroms* in 1871 and on a larger scale in 1881–84 in tsarist Russia. At the turn of the 19th century, anti-Semitism also spread in Western and Central Europe, where emancipation processes had seemingly opened the path for secularized and middle-class Jews to social, cultural, and political integration. It was against the background of anti-Semitism and “failed” assimilation that the idea of promoting Jewish immigration to and settlement in Palestine began to gain traction among Jews (Lockman 2010).

The implementation of Zionism as a coherent project of nation-state building depended on several factors: establishing a material infrastructure for colonization, creating a sound demographic base through Jewish immigration, and gaining political support from colonial powers for the establishment of a national home (Kimmerling 1983). These would become feasible after World War I with the imposition of a British colonial regime on Palestine, committed since the Balfour Declaration in 1917 to fostering the building of the Jewish national home and suppressing Arab opposition to that enterprise. Under the auspices of the British Mandate, the pace of Jewish immigration accelerated, so that by 1931 Jews were 17 percent of the total population in Palestine. The conditions for Jewish land purchases and settlement activity became favorable and the Yishuv (pre-state Jewish community in Palestine) gradually developed a separatist institutional infrastructure that came to encompass its Jewish population, increasingly composed of immigrants from Europe. Yet it was only in the late 1930s, after the imposition of severe restrictions on immigration in Western countries alongside the rise of the Nazi regime, that Jews regarded Palestine as a major haven and *aliyah* mounted to more than 50 percent of Jewish migration (Eisenstadt 1967).

The consolidation of Zionism in Palestine clashed with the emerging national aspirations of the country’s Palestinian majority, which regarded Zionism as a colonial-settler enterprise, whose goal or inevitable result was to dispossess and displace them from their ancestral homeland. As a Palestinian nationalist movement emerged to oppose the Jewish presence, and to demand independence, intercommunal strife intensified. As a result, after 1930 the British Mandate authorities imposed restrictions on Jewish colonization and immigration

to Palestine. However, the plight of European Jews escaping the Nazi horrors and later, of the Holocaust survivors, still in European camps after World War II, was an important moral and political factor in the deliberations on the future of Palestine in 1945–47.

By the time the UN General Assembly voted to endorse the partition plan of the country into independent Arab and Jewish states in November 1947, the Zionist and Palestinian respective projects of statehood in Palestine were irreconcilable. Upon the formal termination of the British Mandate in May 1948, Zionist leaders in Palestine proclaimed a Jewish state, Israel. With the aid of neighboring Arab states, Palestinians sought to prevent partition and declared war. When the fighting ended in 1949, Israel was in control of 77 percent of Mandatory Palestine (as opposed to 55% offered by the UN partition proposal). Less than a fifth of the Palestinians who had lived within Israel's new borders remained.

Migration and settlement were instrumental both in modern Israel's nation-state building and in the creation of a protracted national conflict between Jews and Palestinians claiming rights over the same land. Demography and territory retain to this day their practical and ideological value in shaping the distinctive character of Israel as an active immigrant and settler society engaged in what is perceived, both internally and externally, as an ongoing and unfinished nation-state building process.

### Patterns of immigration

The history of modern Israel and its social fabric are to a great extent the history of Jewish immigrations. In 2010, Israel's population comprised of 75.6 percent Jews and a large indigenous national minority of Arabs (20%) (Central Bureau of Statistics 2010). In the period 1948–2000, 2.8 million Jewish immigrants came to Israel from all over the world. By the end of 2000, nearly 40 percent of Israel's Jewish residents were immigrants or their offspring (Cohen 2002: 36). Until the mid-1990s, immigration accounted for 40 percent of Israel's population growth and for 50 percent of

the increase in the Jewish population (Della Pergola 1998).

The social significance of migration in Israel goes beyond its demographic impact. Migration patterns have constituted a defining mechanism in the making of collective identities and in the shaping of a deeply divided society, that differentiates Jews from Arabs, Ashkenazi (Eastern European) from Mizrahi (Middle Eastern and North African) Jews, and citizens from non-citizens. Yet, as the advent of new migration patterns indicate, immigration is also an ongoing transformative process that challenges established social boundaries and ensuing inter and intra-group dynamics.

Immigration in Israel can be divided into three major periods, as follows.

#### *Pre-statehood migration (1880–1948)*

Zionist historiography distinguishes five waves of pre-state migration by immigrants' motivations; the interplay of push and pull factors generating migration; their socio-demographic composition; and their distinctive role in Zionist colonization and institutional building. The first *aliyah* (1881–1903) initiated by *Hovevei Zion* (Lovers of Zion), from Russia, established the *moshavot*, agricultural settlements dependant and administered by the philanthropy of Baron Rothschild, that drew on Arab hired agricultural workers. The second (1904–14) and third (1919–23) *aliyah* comprised Zionist labor groups of mainly young men whose strategy for the implementation of practical Zionism, based on separatist labor market and colonization, laid the foundation for new forms of rural settlement (*kvutza*, *kibbutz*, *moshav*) and eventually of an autonomous political community (Shafir 1989). Coupled with a "pioneering" (*halutzit*) ideology of self-sacrifice, agrarianism, and self-defense, and rejuvenation of the Hebrew language and culture, the labor movement was to become identified as a nation-state building elite that would remain hegemonic until the 1970s (Shapiro 1977). The fourth (1924–28) and fifth (1929–39) *aliyah* comprised middle-class families from Poland and Germany respectively, escaping anti-Semitism and restrictive

immigration quotas in Western countries. They settled in the growing cities, and entered small businesses, light industry, and professional occupations. They introduced to the Jewish Yishuv a “bourgeois” ethos that differed from the ideologically predominant socialist and rural “pioneering” ideology. An additional wave designates immigrants arriving illegally in 1939–48 after the publication of the British White Paper, an official report which rejected, in essence, the Peel Commission’s partition plan and established stringent restrictions on Jewish immigration and on land acquisition by Jews in Palestine.

### *Early statehood migration (1948–1970s)*

We can discern two distinct phases, first the “demographic transformation” that took place in 1948–51, which involved two migration processes of almost equal size and dramatic significance: the forced emigration of Palestinians (c.760,000) and immigration of Jews from Arab countries and Holocaust survivors (c.678,000). Both contributed to the Jewish majority in the new state as the proportion of Jews rose from 44.7 percent in 1947 to 89 percent at the end of 1951 (Cohen 2002: 37). Questions regarding the reasons for the Palestinian exodus, whether the Zionist military intentionally expelled them or they fled as a result of fear and war, are a matter of historical debate and ongoing political contention. Conversely, the fact that once they left, Palestinian refugees were prevented from return, has been thoroughly documented. During the war and its aftermath, about four hundred Arab villages were destroyed (Morris 1987).

Jewish immigrants were housed in vacant Arab houses, mostly in cities; Jewish communities were established either on or near the lands of destroyed Arab villages; and a policy of population dispersal along the border areas was implemented for securing Jewish sovereignty (Hakohen 2003). War and deliberate policies then radically transformed the ethnoreligious composition of the country. They also created a national minority of Arabs who were granted Israeli citizenship in 1948, but who only since the abolition of the military

administration (in 1966) have formally enjoyed civil and political rights on a liberal basis, as long as these rights do not conflict with the national goals of the Jewish majority (Shafir & Peled 2002).

The mass immigration also altered the ethnic composition of Israel’s Jewish population. During the British Mandate period, 90 percent of Jewish immigrants arrived from Europe whereas only 10 percent from Asia and Africa. Following high-scale inflows and state-led operations that transplanted entire Jewish communities from Yemen, Bulgaria, and Iraq to Israel, the composition of the immigrant population shifted in 1951 to 28 percent from Europe, 60 percent from Asia, and 12 percent from Africa (Hakohen 2003).

The combination of massive immigration, a scarcity of resources, both of the immigrants who had to hastily depart from their countries of origin and of the receiving society in a postwar period, and streamlined assimilation policies based on paternalistic assumptions, had a detrimental effect on the mode of reception and incorporation of the new immigrants (Bernstein 1981; Swirski & Bernstein 1982). Its imprint is evident in the resilience of ethnic stratification between Ashkenazi and Mizrahi Jews to date, as socioeconomic and educational gaps have not narrowed, even in the second generation (Cohen 1998).

The second phase covers sporadic migration (1953–1970s): Immigration in this period was more infrequent and resulted mostly from political, social, and economic events in specific countries of origin. Prominent in this period were Jewish immigrants from Morocco and Romania, the bulk of inflows from 1952 to 1967. After 1967, two noticeable patterns of immigrations comprised Jewish *refuseniks* from the USSR in the 1970s and Iranian Jews following the Islamic revolution in 1979. These immigrants encountered a different reception context as a broad infrastructure of public housing and support was available to them. Research indicates that immigrants of the 1970s and the 1980s became integrated, achieving higher levels of socioeconomic attainment (Rajman & Semyonov 1998).

***Renewal of high-scale immigration  
(post-1990s)***

Since the beginning of the 1990s, Israel has witnessed a renewal of massive immigration flows very different in terms of their ethnic composition and the types of challenge they pose onto the Zionist vision of the state.

New migrations involved three distinct patterns, as follows.

1. Migrants and family members arriving under the Law of Return, from the former Soviet Union (FSU) and Ethiopia.

In the decade following the downfall of the FSU in 1989, 920,000 immigrants arrived in Israel, 400,000 of them between 1989 and 1991. Together with Soviet Jews that arrived in the 1970s, the 1990s FSU immigrants constitute the largest ethnic group to have immigrated to the Israeli state as their proportion in the total population increased from 3.8 percent in 1990 to 12.4 percent in 2001. Their presence is felt in the social, cultural, and political spheres and, given the qualified human capital of the new immigrants, their impact on the Israeli economy is staggering (Raijman & Kemp 2010). The persistence of a “Russian” cultural orientation that is not compatible with “melting pot” notions of assimilation has raised academic and public debate regarding the formation of segregationist ethnic enclave within the larger society (Leshem & Lissak 1999; Al-Haj 2004).

At the other end of the socioeconomic spectrum are Ethiopian Jewish immigrants, known as *Beta Israel*. Ethiopian immigrants arrived in Israel in three major waves. The two earlier waves were organized by the Israeli government and the Jewish Agency and immigrants were brought through high risk operations – Operation Moses in 1984–85 and Operation Solomon 1991 (Herzog 1999). The third wave is still ongoing, amidst a major public debate in Israeli society over the inclusion of the Falas Mura or Zera Beta Israel (Ethiopian Jews converted to Christianity). By 2000,

the number of Ethiopians living in Israel was estimated at 74,000; 20 percent of them were Israeli born (Central Bureau of Statistics 2000). Their transition from a rural to a developed society has not been an easy one. Ethiopian immigrants are perceived as a vulnerable population, thus justifying the involvement of the state in all aspects of their integration process. Nevertheless, the Ethiopian community in Israel constitutes one of the poorest populations in the country with almost half of all Ethiopian families depending on welfare support as the only source of income (Swirski & Swirski 2002). Their immigration has brought to the fore a new dimension to the Israeli public discourse on migration – race and racially based discrimination (Ben-Eliezer 2008).

Both migrations pose new challenges to the predominant pattern of “ethnic return migration” and to the definition of *aliyah* as exclusively Jewish immigration. Upon their immigration through the Law of Entry, Falas Mura have to undergo a strict conversion to Judaism and Beta Israel, whose Judaism is cast in doubt by the religious establishment, are subjected to orthodox Jewish education. As for immigrants from the FSU, while entering through the Law of Return, 30 percent of them are non-Jews according to the *Halakha* (rabbinic law), thus creating an oxymoronic category of “non-Jewish *olim*” who face obstacles regarding their civic status. Labeled under the rubric of “others” in terms of religion, these immigrants have not necessarily enlarged the proportion of the Jewish population in Israel. However, they have been incorporated “sociologically” in its midst in the ongoing demographic race with the Arab local minority, within a region that is predominantly Muslim Arab (Lustick 1999).

2. Non-Jewish labor migration, asylum-seekers and refugees.

The Israeli labor market relies heavily on the recruitment of temporary labor migration. The first non-citizen workers in

the Israeli labor market were Palestinians from the occupied territories (Gaza Strip and the West Bank) who since 1967 came under Israeli military rule. Palestinian commuters were recruited to perform manual jobs in construction, agriculture and services and by the end of the 1980s they comprised 8 percent of the Israeli labor force. Their recruitment created an asymmetric economic interdependence based on the reality of a military occupation (Semyonov & Lewin-Epstein 1987).

The deterioration of the political and security situation generated by the intifada (Palestinian uprising) in 1987, and the policy that imposed severe movement restrictions on Palestinians from the Occupied Territories into Israel since the signature of the Oslo Accord in 1993, resulted in the official recruitment of overseas labor migrants to replace Palestinian workers. Ever since, their share in the Israeli labor market has grown rapidly, reaching a peak of 11 percent of the total labor force in 2002, 60 percent of them without permits. In the same year, the Israeli government decided to “close the skies” to further recruitment of foreign labor but the proposed reforms have had little effect (Kemp 2010).

The Israeli labor migration system bears the blueprint of temporary programs designed to meet permanent labor demand while preventing migrants from settling in the country. Following public campaigns by local NGOs, the government decided in 2005 and again in 2010 to naturalize a limited number of children and their families. However, as recent restrictive immigration law proposals and public debates indicate, the insertion of Israel in a transnational system of economic migration has only reinforced exclusionary definitions of membership.

In addition, an increasing number of asylum-seekers entered Israel through the Egyptian border during the last decade. In 2010, their number was estimated as 24,339, the majority originating from

Eritrea (13,310) and Sudan (5,649) (Nathan 2010: 2). Israel is signatory to the 1951 UN Refugee Convention, and was one of its architects, yet it has not developed an orderly asylum system. As a result, most decisions on asylum are made on a piecemeal fashion, leaving asylum-seekers in a prolonged state of liminality. The lack of clear policy and institutional infrastructure for dealing with this new pattern of forced migration coupled with governmental reluctance to take responsibility fosters social animosities and xenophobic discourse that springs from the presence of unwanted immigrants.

### **Israel’s immigration regime**

A cursory look at figures may indicate that the Israeli case belongs to a generic category of immigrant-settler states and societies in which tensions arise between the territorial nationality of a native minority (generated by borders moving over people) and the immigrant ethnicity of the majority (generated by people moving over borders). However, several unique features defy simple characterizations of the Israeli case:

#### *Israel as a diaspora country*

Jewish migration to Israel is ideologically, institutionally, and legally constructed as “return” or diaspora migration. The Law of Return of 1950 is the legal embodiment of this idea. It creates a legal definition of the right of *aliyah* to every Jew and grants them Israeli citizenship immediately upon immigration. Return is conceived as a natural right of Jews and the state is only its “trustee” (Shachar 1999: 241). Throughout the years, the state has been unmatched in its active and nonselective recruitment of Jewish immigrants and overwhelmingly inclusionary policies granting them full participatory citizenship by way of return. Integration programs for co-ethnic migrants provide privileged access to social and economic resources and contribute to the leveling of social and other differences between immigrants and the native born. They posit

Jewish immigrants in a privileged position vis-à-vis Arab citizens and in certain aspects, vis-à-vis Israeli-born Jews. At the same time, the Israeli regime is exclusionary towards non-Jewish immigrants whose incorporation as legitimate members of Israeli society and polity is defined as categorically inconceivable. With the arrival of transnational migrants, many of them wanted but not welcome, Israel has joined the category of “reluctant immigration states and societies.”

### ***A protracted ethnonational conflict***

The Israeli state came into being in the context of incremental Jewish immigration and settlement against the will and to the detriment of the local Arab population. The right of return for Jews, based on the historical reality of persecution and anti-Semitism, has not been paralleled by a concomitant right of return for Palestinian 1948 refugees. Demography is still perceived as a matter of national security and survival, and Jewish immigration remains the main tool for maintaining the demographic superiority of the Jewish population over the Arab minority. Immigration continues to play not only a fundamental role in the socio-demographic makeup of Israeli society but also in the dynamics of a protracted, and thus far, irresolvable national conflict.

SEE ALSO: Jewish migration, 19th century to present; Jewish migration, antiquity; Jewish migration, medieval era; Middle East, labor migration; Palestine, migration 1880 to present

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