

The Demographic Success of Zionism¹

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There are several imaginable ways to evaluate the demographic achievements of Zionism since 1948. Arguably, the three most telling measures are the proportion of Jews living in Israel out of world Jewry, the proportion of Jews vs. Arabs in Israel, and the growth rate of the Jewish population in Israel. By all three standards Zionism has been, thus far, a demographic success. In 1947, just before Israel was established, only 6 percent of the Jews of the world (about 600,000) resided in the area that became Israel in 1949, comprising less than half the population in that area. By 2006 Israel had become the home for about 5.5 million Jews, comprising 40% of world Jewry and about 80% of the state's citizens. For the most part, immigration patterns (including the forced emigration of Arabs in 1947-1949) are responsible for the three dimensions of Zionism's demographic success – increasing the proportion and the absolute number of Jews in Israel, as well as their share in world Jewry. In the following pages I shall discuss changes in immigration patterns to Israel since 1948, with an emphasis not only on the number of immigrants, but also on the number of emigrants, as well as on the educational levels of immigrants and emigrants. This inquiry enables us an evaluation of other dimensions of the demographic success of Zionism: its success in keeping emigration rates relatively low; its success in attracting highly educated Jews to immigrate, reside, and stay in Israel; and its success in attracting back those who emigrated, especially the highly educated.

Source countries and patterns of immigrants' self-selection: changes over time

With some exceptions in the early 1950s, Israel has always attempted to bring as many Jews as possible to Israel, and there seems to have been no upper limit to the number of immigrants it has been willing to admit in a given period. Moreover, unlike other migration countries that prefer skilled and young immigrants, Israel's declared policy is

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to admit all Jewish immigrants, with no regard to age, educational level, ethnic origin, and skin color. On the face of it, it looks as if actual migration patterns are consistent with this declared policy. However, when potential Jewish immigrants chose to go to a country other than Israel, Zionist values and goals led Israel to adopt a less humanitarian policy. Such was the case in the 1970s and late 1990s when Israel asked the U.S. and Germany, respectively, to stop granting refugee status to Soviet Jews who preferred the U.S. or Germany over Israel as their new home. In general, however, in the last half-century, migration patterns to Israel suggest that the state has been consistently fulfilling the core Zionist mission – "populating the land with a multitude of Jews," in Ben Gurion's words.

While Israel actively attracts and accepts all Jews, not all Jews choose to immigrate to Israel. With time, however, the demographic success of Zionism manifested itself also in the type of people who chose Israel as their destination. In the first two decades after independence, many immigrants were stateless refugees, and others fled repressive regimes in Eastern Europe, and Arab states that were in conflict with the new Jewish state. Many of those who could have gone to a more developed state went there, as did about 60% of Holocaust survivors in Displaced Person camps (Grodzinsky 2004). Those residing in developed countries in Western Europe, North America, and Australia did not consider immigrating to Israel. Consequently, the immigrants arriving in Israel in the first twenty years after statehood had lower educational levels than the resident Jewish population of Israel.

Following the 1967 war, the type of immigrants choosing Israel as their country of destination changed. For religious, ideological and economic reasons, immigrants from Western Europe and America, mostly highly educated, have begun coming to Israel. Immigrants arriving from the Soviet Union and other countries in Eastern Europe, Africa and Asia were of higher educational levels than their predecessors coming from the same countries in the 1950s and 1960s.² Apparently, Israel of the post-1967 period has become

² But during the 1970s and early 1980s, Jewish emigrants from the FSU that reached the US were of higher educational levels than those coming to Israel (Cohen and Haberfeld Forthcoming).

a more attractive destination for educated immigrants. The average immigrant coming to Israel during the mass migration of 1948 to 1951, had 7.4 years of schooling, compared to 10.4 years among native-born Israelis³. This gap between recently-arrived immigrants and native Jews gradually narrowed over the years until 1972, when recently arrived immigrants and natives had the same average years of schooling. Eleven years later, in 1983, recent immigrants surpassed natives by 1.3 years, and this trend continued until 1992, when the first and largest wave of immigration from the post-communist Former Soviet Union (FSU) ended.

To be sure, shifts from low to high education countries (e.g., from Yemen to the USSR) contributed to much of the rise in immigrants' years of schooling during 1948 to 1991. However, most of the rise in immigrants' schooling level occurred because of changes over time in the education level of successive immigrant cohorts coming from the same countries (i.e. changes within the same country). Consider, for example, Moroccan immigrants. The average Moroccan immigrant man who immigrated to Israel during the late 1960s had little more than eight years of schooling. Ten years later the average Moroccan immigrant who arrived during the late 1970s had about fourteen years of schooling, more than the average among natives. Apparently, in the 1950s and 1960s, the more educated Moroccan Jews either stayed in Morocco or immigrated elsewhere, especially to France and Canada (Bensimon and DellaPergola 1986). Only in the 1970s did the more educated Moroccans self-selected themselves to come to Israel. To be sure, it is possible that these immigrants' schooling represents the average schooling among the remaining Moroccan-born Jews outside Israel. There are no readily available data to test this possibility. It is important to emphasize, however, that even if this is the case, (self) selection processes in the 1950s and 1960s are in large part responsible for the dramatic rise in the average schooling of Moroccan immigrants to Israel starting in the mid-1970s.

The increase in schooling level among successive cohorts of Romanian immigrants is

³ The benchmark to which immigrants' schooling is compared is composed of third-generation Israeli Jews. Immigrants' years of schooling refer to the educational levels of immigrant men at the time they arrived Israel.

even more striking. Their mean years of schooling increased from 9.7 for the cohort arriving during the late 1950s, to 13.8 for the cohort of the late 1960s, and to a peak of 15.6 for those arriving during the late 1970s and early 1980s. In the case of Romanian immigrants, however, available evidence suggests that the negative selectivity was imposed by the Romanian government that forbade educated Jews from leaving until the late 1960s. In the late 1940s, Segev (1984) reports, the Romanian authorities demanded a fee for allowing Jews to emigrate. Israel bargained (“the price is too high, the merchandise is of low quality”), but with no real bargaining power, and in line with fulfilling the Zionist mission, paid \$50 for each emigrant. Once restrictions were relaxed, the educational level of Romanian Jewish immigrants in Israel increased dramatically and was much higher than that of earlier immigrants as well as that of native Israelis. Evidently, patterns of immigrant selectivity from most source countries, have improved after the 1967 war until the early 1990s.

There is one important exception to the above conclusion – the schooling level of US immigrants in Israel, which has been declining for the past 30 years. The selectivity of U.S. immigrants is of interest for two reasons. First, the U.S. is the second largest source country for immigrants in the post-1967 area (and the third largest in the post-1989 period). Second, in the U.S., unlike in most other countries, there is readily available information on the schooling level of potential immigrants (U.S. Jews), thereby allowing us to directly analyze immigrants' selectivity. Available data suggest that from 1970 to 2000 the proportion of college graduates among American Jews increased by 34 percentage points, from 36 percent to 70 percent. At the same time, the proportion of college graduates among American Jews that self-selected themselves to immigrate to Israel declined by 8 percentage points, from 77 percent among those coming immediately after the 1967 war, to 69 percent among those arriving during the late 1990s. In short, while in the first years after the 1967 war the "best and the brightest" among US Jews immigrated to Israel, the pattern of educational selectivity has gradually deteriorated, and by 2000 those coming to Israel are of the same educational level as that of US Jews. Apparently, US immigrants were selective on other dimensions, including political ideology. This pattern of political selectivity is evidenced by their crowding into the

Jewish settlements in the West Bank. In both 1983 and 1995 (the years for which data are available), the share of U.S.-born in Jewish settlements in the occupied West Bank and the Gaza strip was over four times their share in the Jewish population of Israel.

This exception notwithstanding, US immigrants are still highly educated relative to the native population of Israel, hence this case does not alter the conclusion that overall, in the post-1967 period, Israel attracted immigrants whose skill level was higher than that of the native Israeli population.

Emigration, return migration, and selectivity

An equally important demographic achievement of Zionism in the second half of the 20th century is its success in retaining immigrants and their offspring, including the highly educated, in Israel. Despite popular and some scholarly writing to the contrary, the rate of Jewish emigration from Israel is not high relative to emigration rates in other immigration countries. According to the border police (which keeps count of all exits and entries among Israeli residents) only about 8% of the nearly one million immigrants who came to Israel since 1989 have left it until the end of 2005 (Sheps 2007). The emigration rate of Israeli-born is even lower. Analyses of US census data suggest that the number of Israeli-born Jewish immigrants in the US in 2000 was about 100,000. The respective figure in 1990s was 80,000.⁴ The total number of Israelis living in the US, including those not born in Israel, is more difficult to estimate. In 1990 the estimate, based on data from the US census and the Immigration and Naturalization Service, ranges between 30,000 to 55,000 (Cohen and Haberfeld 1997). Assuming that between 1990 and 2000 this group grew at the same rate as the Israeli-born in the US, the total of number of Israelis in the US in 2000 (Israeli born and foreign born) is between 153,000 and 175,000. Given that the US is the destination country for at least one half of Israeli emigrants, the total number of Israeli emigrants (Israeli-born Jews plus Jewish immigrants to Israel who eventually left Israel) in 2000, is at most 350,000. The estimate presented to the Israeli Parliament by the CBS (Central Bureau of Statistics) – a total of 554,000 emigrants during 1948-2001 (Staetsky 2004) – includes Israeli Arabs and

⁴ For an algorithm for identifying Israeli-born Jews in the US census data, see Cohen and Haberfeld (1997).

emigrants who died abroad. Without these two groups⁵ the CBS estimate for the stock of Israeli Jews abroad at the end of 2001 is below 400,000⁶, and not much higher than my above estimate (300-350 thousands), which is based on the US data.

Not surprisingly, estimates published by organizations responsible for advancing Zionism's demographic missions, are higher than those of the CBS. The Israeli Ministry of Absorption, to take one example, on the basis of no evidence, estimated that at the end of 2003 there were 750,000 Israeli emigrants living abroad (cited in Gould and Moav [2006]). Higher estimates probably include, in addition to emigrants who died abroad, children born aboard to emigrant parents, and non-Israeli spouses of emigrants. Gross over-estimation of the Israeli Diaspora is not a new phenomenon, nor limited to groups with vested interests in high numbers. In the late 1970s a leading sociologist estimated that in the US alone there were 350,000 Israelis (Kass and Lipset 1979). Less objective estimates were even higher, up to half a million in the US (Lahis 1980).

Perhaps the prevailing notion that the Israeli community in the US is larger than its true size is rooted in the popular perception that every Israeli ever residing abroad is an immigrant. It is true that the number of all Israelis who ever spent a year abroad is much higher than the estimate for the stock of Israeli emigrants abroad in a particular year. However, the assumption that all those leaving Israel forever stay in their new destination is erroneous. Rather, rates of return migration to Israel are higher than to most other sending countries (Cohen and Haberfeld 2001). Indeed, analyses of data drawn from the 1980 and 1990 US censuses suggest that about one third of Israeli-born who came to the US between 1975 and 1980, returned to Israel prior to 1990. Given the growing Israeli economy in the 1990s, it is reasonable to expect that the rates of return migration during 1990-2000 were at least as high as they were in the 1980s. Moreover, this rate of return migration was derived from immigrants who resided in the US for an average of 2.5 years, and for as many as 5 years. Most immigrants returning to their home countries do so one to two years after immigration. Thus, the above estimate is a lower bound because

⁵ The CBS estimates that there are about 100,000 Arab emigrants, and between 64,000 and 107,000 emigrants who died abroad (Sheps 2007; Hleihel and Ben-Moshe 2002).

⁶ For a similar CBS estimate for the stock of emigrants at end of 1999 see Hleihel and Ben-Moshe (2002).

it omits from the calculation all those who immigrated to the US, and returned to Israel during 1975-1980. An upper bound for the rate of return migration among Israelis abroad can be estimated using data collected by the Israeli border police. These data suggests that the rate of return migration among Israelis who resided abroad for 1-2 years was nearly two-thirds (Cohen and Haberfeld 2001).

In the past fifty years, Israeli emigrants have been of higher educational level than the population from which they were drawn (Cohen 1996; Gould and Moav 2006). This fact led some scholars to label emigration from Israel as a “brain drain”. Interestingly, however, there is evidence that the average schooling level of returning Israelis from the US is higher than the levels among those who stayed abroad, suggesting that selectivity to return to Israel is positive, at least on education (Cohen and Haberfeld 2001).

Apparently, some of the sharpest brains return to Israel, and have a positive effect on the Israeli society and economy. For one thing, they find jobs in Israel’s universities and advanced industries. For another, many of them hold key positions in social networks connecting Israel and the US, whose importance for the economic and scientific development of Israel is substantial. Therefore, labeling the emigration of educated Israelis as a “brain drain” is at best an exaggeration, and certainly misses the positive implications for the movement of the highly educated between Israel and the US.

Recent changes in migration patterns

Since the early 1990s, however, the demographic picture has become more complex, raising doubts on the viability of the long term demographic success of Zionism. Since 1992 the immigrants coming from the largest source county, the FSU, are of lower educational level than their predecessors. Those arriving during 1989 to 1991 belonged to the first wave which brought some 400,000 immigrants to Israel. In subsequent years, up until 2000, the annual number of immigrants from the former USSR was around 60,000 to 80,000. The schooling levels of those arriving in the first wave were significantly higher (14 years on average) than that of those arriving after 1992 (13 years). Apparently, in the post-1991 years more FSU immigrants, especially the educated, have been seeking other destinations, most notably the US, Canada, and more recently,

Germany, which in 2002 took more FSU Jews (about 22,000) than either Israel or the US. In the post-1989 period, the second largest source country, after the FSU, has been Ethiopia. In the early 1980s, the educational levels of Ethiopian immigrants were very low. Those who arrived in the 1990s were of similar educational level and perhaps even lower than their predecessors. In sum, immigrants arriving from the two largest source countries, comprising nearly 90 percent of the immigrants during the 1990s, were of lower educational levels than their predecessors (and were also lower than levels of the native population of Israel). Interestingly, Jewish immigrants from the FSU who arrived during the 1990s to Canada (Lewin-Epstein et al. 2003) or the US (Cohen and Haberfeld 2006) were of higher educational levels than their counterparts who came to Israel; however, those arriving to Germany in the 1990s were of similar educational level as those coming to Israel (Cohen and Kogan 2005, 2007). In short, in the competition for educated immigrants from the FSU, Israel performs rather well vs. Germany, but loses to the US and Canada.

The migration patterns of the past six years, since the outbreak of second *intifada*, are even more suggestive. Since 1999 the annual number of immigrants has declined (it dropped to 21,000 in 2005, down from 77,000 in 1999); the annual number of emigrants has risen from about 14,000 in 1996-2000, to 20,000 in 2002-03, when the number of terrorists attacks were the highest; and an increasing number of Israeli Jews have been applying for immigrant visas to the US, Canada, and Australia (Lustick 2004). Furthermore, for the first time, many Israelis have been applying for citizenship in European countries which are already part of, or soon to be part of, the European Union (e.g. Germany, Poland, Hungary, Romania and Bulgaria). Many of them do not expect to immigrate to any of these countries. Rather, according to reports in the popular press they are seeking `insurance` for themselves and their children in case the political and economic situation in Israel will deteriorate. Whether or not many Israelis will use their new European passports for emigration, is a matter of speculation. Past experience suggests that most Israelis, especially the Israeli-born, either do not emigrate, and most of those that do, eventually return to Israel. Indeed the latest figures available from the Central Bureau of Statistics suggest that with the relative decline in terrorist attacks inside

Israel, as well as the improved economy, the number of emigrants declined to 16,000 in 2004 and 14,000 in 2005 (from the peak of 20,000 in 2002). Evidently, the long term viability of Zionism's success in keeping Israelis from leaving, and attracting those living abroad to return, has been continuing in the 21st century.

More troubling for the Zionist mission than lower immigration rates, rising emigration, and declining schooling levels of immigrants, is the monotonic rise in the proportion of non-Jews among immigrants from the former Soviet republics, as well as the non-Jewish labor migrants who were recruited by Israel since 1993. It is ironic that Zionism's very success – military, economic, and demographic – has led to an incipient challenge to the original mission it set out to accomplish. Evidently, contemporary migration patterns are not as conducive as previous patterns to fulfilling the Zionist mission. In addition to about 1.4 million Arab citizens (and over three million Arabs under occupation), Israel now faces a challenge it has never faced before: dealing with about 500,000 non-Jewish, non-Arab residents (some of whom are not citizens). Thus far, however, it seems that Israel has been more successful in dealing with the non-Jewish immigrants from the FSU, than with labor migrants. The main Israeli socialization agents, most notably the educational system and the military, “convert” non-Jewish immigrants from the FSU – not necessarily according to Jewish religious law – but rather socially and culturally, and integrates them, and especially their children, into the Jewish (or Jewish-Russian) community in Israel. Moreover, the rate of emigration from Israel among non-Jewish FSU immigrants is substantially higher than the rate among their Jewish counterparts (Sheps 2007). Apparently, non-Jewish emigrants are those who are not willing – or failed – to assimilate in the Jewish-Israeli society.

By contrast, Israel's ability to deal with labor migrants proved more difficult, and it is hard to predict if their number (about 200,000 at the end of 2005 according to the Bank of Israel [2005]) will grow or decline in the near future. About two-thirds of labor migrants are undocumented, that is de facto permanent residents, who are not leaving Israel despite the hardships they face as undocumented, non-Jewish residents. Judging by the past, it is hard to imagine that Israel will adopt a policy granting labor migrants legal status as

permanent residents, not to speak of citizenship. More likely is that the “relaxation in the enforcement and deportation activities aimed at reducing the number of undocumented workers,” that was identified worryingly in the Bank of Israel’s annual report (2005, page 181), will be reversed, and Zionists value will be used for the institutionalization and justification of a harsher deportation policy, similar to the policy that prevailed in the early 2000s.

Alas, past experience suggests that enforcement of a harsh deportation policy is not very effective. It hardly lowered the total number of labor migrants, and did not at all affect the rate of the undocumented among them. The revolving door practice – recruiting new labor migrants to replace those who left (willingly or unwillingly) keep their number high. Thus, labor migrants, especially those in agriculture and construction, assist in fulfilling a core Zionist value – “conquest of the land.” At the same time, however, labor migrants harm the achievement of another long lasting Zionist goal: “conquest of work.” Past experience, however, also suggest that Zionism has an impressive ability to solve such problems. We can therefore expect that eventually creative solutions will be found, and this dilemma, too, will be solved.

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