

Making room at the table: Incorporation of foreign workers in Israel[☆]

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Abstract

In this article, we explore how foreign workers' presence is redefining the identity borders of Israeli society and the challenges posed to Israeliness by the inclusion of first, 1.5 and second generation foreign workers in the Israeli polity. We explore how these migrants perceive life in Israel, their own and their children's identities, prospects for incorporation and permanence and intersections between Israeliness and Jewishness. To inform our analysis, we conducted interviews in winter 2010 with 22 foreign workers who are first generation; about half are parents of children in Israel. Our analysis reveals that foreign workers seek acceptance into the Israeli polity, especially for their children who have been socialized into Israeli life and that their potential inclusion has real implications for the understanding of what it means to be Israeli.

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1. Introduction

Citizenship is a fundamental organizing principle delineating insiders and outsiders. The determination of who the members are is often a hotly contested idea. Israel, despite being the world's only Jewish state, is no exception and provides a useful context for understanding temporary migrants in an ethnonational state where there is a fundamental mismatch between members of the nation and all of the members of the state, an issue confronted by many states whose temporary migrants have become permanent residents.

In Israel, this debate comes in the form of asking 'what is Israeli?' and, if it is possible to conceive of Israeliness without Jewishness? Israeliness here refers to a civil, political, linguistic, territorial space. What Israeliness actually is and who could be included under the definition of Israeli, is, however, contested (Kimmerling, 2002, 2004; Liebman & Don-Yehiya, 1981; Shafir & Peled, 2002). Given the scope and rapidity of (Jewish) immigrant incorporation in Israel concomitant with developing national cohesion and coherent national myths, it is not surprising that there is no

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consensus on what Israeliness really means. Even in Israel's earliest days, elites worried about (Jewish) immigrants altering of the nascent Israeli culture (Kimmerling, 2004). Now, as in any ethnonational state in transition, defining membership becomes more complex with the addition of immigrants from around the globe who interact with natives and the state and introduce new customs, languages, religions and behaviors and whose presence invites and incites new behaviors from the receiving state.

Since the founding of the state of Israel in 1948, being "Israeli" was synonymous with being Jewish. Any exceptions, including the now 1.5 million Arabs (about 20% of the total population) residing inside Israeli borders, most of whom are Israeli citizens, were excluded from the dominant citizenship discourse.² The mutually exclusive contextual framing of Israeli citizenship held mainly because it served the Jewish–Arab divide, which remains, outside of Israel, the dominant prism through which to understand Israeli society and politics (Kimmerling, 2002; Shafir & Peled, 2002). The citizenship discourse recently has become more complicated, mainly due to the influx of new non-Jewish immigrants, especially from the Former Soviet Union (FSU), and a large number of foreign workers.³ Foreign workers pose a new reality: they are not Jews or related to Jews nor are they indigenous Arabs. Although some have found a home in Israel, these migrants live largely at the periphery of Israeli society. Nonetheless, some migrant children, born and raised in Israel – unrecognized by Israeli law – are being socialized through Israeli schools and everyday life and actually identify as Israelis. Practically, as the number of foreign workers rise, the majority of Jews in the Jewish state declines. Symbolically, as foreign workers increasingly undertake menial tasks, they challenge long honed Israeli images of "sabras" (native born Israelis) who make the desert bloom through ingenuity; of the "new Jew" whose physical labor counteracts the old European claims of unproductive classes; of the unified engaged community, as embodied in the almost mythic Israeli form of *kibbutz*; and of Herzl's *Judenstaat*, as a state for Jewish people and not only of Jewish principles.

In this piece, we explore how foreign workers' presence is redefining the identity borders of Israeli society and the challenges posed to the citizenship definition by the inclusion of first, 1.5 and second generation foreign workers in the Israeli polity. We argue that their experiences and interactions with Israelis and with the Israeli government are part of Israeli life and should not be perceived as parallel experiences. As such, their experiences in Israel bear on the Israeliness–Jewishness debate and on what it means to be Israeli. We explore how these migrants perceive life in Israel, their own and their children's identities, prospects for incorporation and permanence, perceptions of social borders and entry points and intersections between Israeliness and Jewishness. To inform our analysis, we conducted interviews with 22 foreign workers who are first generation, about half of whom are parents of children in Israel.

2. The Israeli case

Israel poses an intriguing setting for understanding contemporary temporary migrants in an ethnonational state: while its doors are wide open to Jews, regardless of national background, the exclusive nature of "Jewishness" rebuffs penetration from non-Jews. The Proclamation of the Establishment of the State of Israel reads "The State of Israel will be open for Jewish immigration and the ingathering of the exiles. . . ." This was implemented through the 1950 Law of Return, which proclaims "Every Jew has the right to come to this country as an *oleh*" (a Jew returning from Diaspora). Any Jew may "claim" his Israeli citizenship upon arrival in Israel and be offered citizenship rights and obligations available to all other Israeli citizens including voting and political participation, settlement monies and subsidies as well as military service obligations.⁴ Israel has no immigration policy: all "immigrants" are Jews, and thus, citizens at entry; related to Jews, and covered by modifications in the Law of Return⁵; or, in rare cases, refugees covered by international treaties. All Jews arriving in Israel are automatically citizens of Israel if they request *aliya* (Hebrew for "immigration" and also refers to ascending for religious honors). All others are considered temporary and expected to leave after completing tourism or work.

² See especially Kimmerling (2002).

³ Israel uses, and we have adopted, the term "*ovedim zarim*" or foreign workers.

⁴ Jews do not "immigrate," as they are already citizens. They must only assert claims for extant citizenship.

⁵ See "Law of Return 5710-1950", Israel Ministry of Foreign Affairs Website, http://www.mfa.gov.il/MFA/MFAArchive/1950_1959/Law%20of%20Return%205710-1950.

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