



# Public attitudes toward policies related to labor migrants in Israel



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## ABSTRACT

This paper focuses on determinants of public attitudes in Israel toward two policy questions. First, should immigration policy measures be more restrictive toward overseas labor migrants? Secondly, should overseas labor migrants be replaced with Palestinian workers? Based on an attitudinal survey administered to a representative sample of the Israeli population, the findings indicate that support for a restrictive immigration policy is quite prevalent among Israelis. However, the survey reveals only moderate consent for replacing overseas labor migrants with Palestinian commuters. Attitudes toward a restrictive immigration policy are explained by the perceived threat posed by overseas labor migrants to social and economic interests. This threat is explained by the respondents' socio-economic characteristics. Attitudes toward the replacement policy are partially explained by the sense of threat to the Jewish character of the state posed by overseas migrants, but are also attributed to several personal characteristics. Policy implications of these findings are discussed.

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## 1. Introduction

The growing literature on public attitudes toward minorities, labor migrants, and other out-groups reveals that high levels of hostility toward those groups and support for exclusionary attitudes against them are widespread in western societies (Ceobanu & Escandell, 2010; Fetzer, 2000; Kessler & Freeman, 2005; Semyonov, Raijman, & Gorodzeisky, 2008). These attitudes relate to the exclusion of out-groups from the system of

socioeconomic and political rights. These attitudes also refer to the exclusion of out-groups from the social system of the state through a more restrictive immigration policy with regard to admission laws, illegal stay of foreigners, family reunion, and citizenship (Gorodzeisky & Semyonov, 2009). This study focuses on the determinants of support for exclusion from the social system as reflected by attitudes of the Israeli public toward immigration policy for overseas labor migrants. The question also addressed is to what extent these determinants play a role in shaping attitudes toward a policy of replacing overseas labor migrants with Palestinian commuters.

Israel is an ethno-national state comprised of a Jewish majority and an Arab minority. In addition to Jewish and Arab citizens of Israel, two groups of non-citizen workers are employed in the Israeli labor market: overseas labor migrants and daily commuters from the Palestinian Authority. Similar to other ethno-national countries,

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especially in Europe, the state immigration policy in Israel is based on an ethno-national perception (Raijman, 2009). The Palestinian–Israeli conflict and the tension related to it among the Israeli Jewish population as well as the Israeli Arab population, point to the uniqueness of the Israeli case. While the importance of the economic relationship between the Palestinian Authority and Israel is well-recognized, the scope of employment of Palestinians is affected by the level of political tension in the region (Etkes, 2011; Miaari & Sauer, 2011; Zussman, Zussman & Nielsen, 2008).

This study examines factors on the level of the individual that might explain the attitude of the Israeli public toward a restrictive immigration policy. The study further examines how these factors shape public attitude toward the replacement of labor migrants from overseas with Palestinian workers. The theoretical models the study uses that suggest two complementary sources for exclusionary attitudes: (a) the fear of competition for economic and social resources – socio-economic threat, and (b) the threat posed by out-groups to the national identity and cultural homogeneity of the society – national threat. The present study may increase understanding of the factors that shape public attitudes toward immigration and labor market policies implemented by the government.

## 2. Background

### 2.1. Labor migration in Israel: general background and trends

Israel is a multi-ethnic country inhabited by Jews from various backgrounds, Arabs, both Christian and Muslim, and several labor migrant populations.<sup>3</sup> Israel's immigration policy is based on an ethno-national doctrine that encourages Jewish immigration to Israel and expresses the state's commitment to their successful absorption, but discourages immigration of non-Jews (Amit & Semyonov, 2006). This perception is reflected in the linkage between the Law of Return (1950) and the Law of Nationality (1952). According to these laws, all Jews or individuals with Jewish ancestry and their family members have the right to settle in Israel and to become Israeli citizens upon arrival. Residency or citizenship is granted to immigrants without a Jewish background in exceptional cases only (Avineri, Orgad, & Rubinstein, 2010).

By law, Israeli Arab citizens are entitled to the same civic rights as the Jewish population. But compared with Jews, the Arab minority is disadvantaged in the labor market in terms of occupational status, wage level, and the allocation of public resources (Semyonov & Levin-Epstein, 1987; Yashiv & Kasir-Kaliner, 2009). The wide socio-economic gaps between Jews and Arabs should also be viewed within

the context of the Israeli–Palestinian conflict in the region (Miaari, Zussman, & Zussman, 2008). Since 1967 and the end of the Six-Day War, Palestinian residents of the West Bank and the Gaza Strip gradually entered the Israeli labor market, and their number soared to 110,000 in the early 1990s, 7% of the Israeli workforce. Employed in low-skilled, low-paying jobs, Palestinian workers are mostly male commuters working in construction, agriculture, and services. Non-Palestinian overseas labor migration to Israel began in 1987, following the outbreak of the first Palestinian uprising (*intifada*). Government policy restricted employment of Palestinians in the Israeli labor market, and as a result, the import and recruitment of overseas migrant workers as a replacement for Palestinian workers increased considerably (Achdut & Natanzon, 1999).

Along with an increase in the number of documented overseas migrant workers who arrived with work permits, the number of undocumented overseas labor migrants in Israel increased as well. By 2002, the number of overseas migrant workers in Israel, officially referred to as foreign workers, was estimated at around 232,000, while the number of Palestinian workers decreased to about 30,000 (Bank of Israel, 2004; 2005). Steps taken by the government to reduce the number of overseas migrant workers, including deportation, led to a decline in the number of overseas migrants, but only temporarily. By 2012, the number of overseas migrants in Israel was estimated at 236,000. Of these, 100,000 entered Israel as tourists without work permits, and remained in the country illegally. By comparison, the number of Palestinian workers in 2012 was about 60,000; one-third of these worked without a permit. Non-Israeli workers, overseas migrants, and Palestinian workers constituted nearly 12% of the total number of workers employed in the business sector in low-skilled agriculture, construction, and elder care jobs. Whereas in agriculture and construction most workers are males – overseas migrants or Palestinian commuters, care-giving is dominated by overseas female migrants (Bank of Israel, 2012; 2013). The overseas migrant population is mainly comprised of individuals from the Southeast Asian countries of Thailand, Philippines, India and China and from countries in Eastern Europe, mainly Romania and the Former Soviet Union (Amit, Della Pergola, & Borowski, 2010).

According to the Foreign Workers Law (1991), overseas labor migrants are entitled to the same employment conditions granted to Israeli workers, such as working hours, minimum wages, and severance pay; employers are responsible for providing them with health insurance. However, in many cases overseas migrant workers find themselves deprived of rights and protection from the government authorities or the unions and endure the worst working conditions. As a minority group in the Israeli labor market, they hold the least desirable jobs and occupations and often earn wages below the legal minimum. Most overseas migrant workers reside in the poorest neighborhoods where they form their own ethnic communities, as in South Tel Aviv (Raijman, 2009). Their presence changes the fabric of society in those neighborhoods and creates conflicts with the local population.

Policymakers in Israel have not yet formulated a national strategy for coping with labor migration from

<sup>3</sup> In late 2010, the population of Israel numbered 7,695,000 citizens. Of these, 5,803,200 were Jews (75.4%), 1,574,000 were Arabs (20.5%), and 318,000 were others (4.3%) not classified according to religion (mostly immigrants and their families who have Jewish ancestry but who are not defined as Jewish under religious law). In addition, there are more than 200,000 overseas migrants (documented and undocumented), who are non-citizens residing in Israel (Central Bureau of Statistics, 2011).

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