



## From nation to profession: Israeli state strategy toward highly-skilled return migration, 1949–2012



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### Abstract

Recent evidence suggests that states in countries of origin deploy various policies geared toward their highly-skilled migrants. Drawing on a critical analysis of primary and secondary historical sources, this paper examines Israel's 'sending state' strategy, making two parallel arguments. First, that a two-pronged approach, termed 'maintain/return', has been adopted by the state as a way to secure ties with – and ultimately return – (highly-skilled) migrants. Secondly, that the justifications for encouraging and supporting return have changed considerably over time. While early efforts were rationalized by the need to repatriate migrants in the name of strengthening the nation, emphasizing as such the geopolitical fragility of the young state and expatriates' weakening ethno-national identity, more recent initiatives have utilized a trajectory of meritocracy that highlights returnees' potential economic contribution (individual), professional satisfaction as well as middle class, family-oriented considerations of 'quality of life'. The paper suggests that these historical changes should be seen against the backdrop of the global race for talent and developments in the understanding of the role of migrants as extra-territorial citizens. The paper contributes to the burgeoning literature on state-migrants' relations, highlighting return as a key, albeit one, tool within sending state strategies.

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Recent years have seen a surge in scholarly interest in return migration, particularly of the highly-skilled. Owing to their increasingly transnational life and a growing tendency to embark on multiple journeys in the course of their professional lives, neither migration nor return of the highly-skilled is currently seen as a final act of mobility.<sup>1</sup> As Ley and Kobayashi argue in this context, '[F]or some migrants return migration is less a final adjustment than another stage in a continuing itinerary with further movements ahead, whether unexpected, or...eagerly awaited'.<sup>2</sup>

It is this flexible, circular nature of mobility that drives large-scale, state-led campaigns designated to capture highly-skilled migrants. Rationalized by 'a global race for talent', states are becoming ever more sophisticated in their quest to attract the best and brightest.<sup>3</sup> But while programs such as Britain's *Highly Skilled Migrant Programme* (HSMP), *Canada for Investors*, or Australia's Point System, which prioritize migrants with valuable economic

and cultural capital, have been receiving considerable attention in migration literature,<sup>4</sup> sending state policies designed to return home *their own* highly-skilled expatriates have been far less discussed. This conceptual lacuna is particularly troubling in the case of Israel where 'Ingathering of the Exiles', the state's *raison d'être*, has long generated a lively public discourse on repatriation of migrants, and, consequently, incentive-based return programs.<sup>5</sup>

Drawing on a critical analysis of historical materials, this paper brings the state back into the discussion and sheds light on Israel's sending state strategy. In so doing, the paper makes two parallel arguments. First, that a two-pronged approach, referred to as 'maintain/return', has been adopted by the state as a way to secure ties with and ultimately return (highly-skilled) migrants. An ethnocentric approach, which sees every *de jure* and *de facto* Israeli citizen of Jewish descent residing abroad as an important demographic and, often, economic asset, it advocates a maintenance of close relations with migrants alongside an allocation of public

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<sup>1</sup> D. Ley, Transnational spaces and everyday lives, *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers* 29 (2004) 151–164.

<sup>2</sup> D. Ley and A. Kobayashi, Back to Hong Kong: return migration or transnational sojourn, *Global Networks* 5 (2005) 111–127 [113].

<sup>3</sup> A. Shachar, The race for talent: highly skilled migrants and competitive immigration regimes, *NYU Law Review* 81 (2006) 148–206.

<sup>4</sup> D.A. Cobb-Clark and M.D. Connolly, The worldwide market for skilled migrants: can Australia compete?, *International Migration Review* 31 (1997) 670–693; R. Iredale, The migration of professionals: theories and typologies, *International Migration* 39 (2001) 7–26; S. Mahroum, Highly skilled globetrotters: mapping the international migration of human capital, *R&D Management* 30 (2000) 23–32.

<sup>5</sup> N. Toren, Return migration to Israel, *International Migration Review* 12 (1978) 39–54.

resources to set up concerted, though time-limited initiatives to repatriate them. Acknowledging that state resources are limited yields a market-driven return policy, prioritizing the highly-skilled among the Israeli populace abroad.<sup>6</sup>

Secondly, a critical review and analysis of the discourse leading up to the state's four return programs (1968, 1978, 1998, and 2008) reveals that inasmuch as return remains a key policy objective of successive Israeli administrations, its justifications have altered considerably over time, according to leading state ideologies. Specifically, while earlier efforts were rationalized by the need to repatriate migrants in the name of strengthening the nation, emphasizing as such the geopolitical and economic fragility of the young state as well as expatriates' unstable ethno-national identity, deliberations leading up to more recent initiatives often downplayed historical considerations of identity, relying instead upon a trajectory of professional meritocracy and socio-economic comfort in Israel. Stressing returnees' expected contribution to Israel's free market economy, while underlying individual professional as well as familial considerations of middle-class standard of living and quality of life, political discourse of return has gradually shifted from *our* 'nation' to *my* 'profession'. The changing political discourse on return migration, it is argued, is attributed to political economic transformations taking place in Israel in recent decades as well as the ways by which the state and leading societal actors conceive of migrants' potential role.

The paper's main contribution lies in tracing the evolving linkages between sending state strategies, and return migration discourse and practice. Inasmuch as return policy is set within specific political–economic conditions prevailing in the country of origin, it is argued, we ought to consider the changing geo-historical trajectories through which it is rationalized, negotiated and, ultimately implemented. In this context, the rather technical approach to return policy analysis in parts of the existing migration literature should be complemented with accounts that probe deeper into the politics of return. The former, alternating between specific rules and regulations set by national administrations wishing to accelerate repatriation and economically-motivated analyses of alleged links between return and development,<sup>7</sup> sometimes fails to see return as a contested process within which returnees become political subjects whom the state imagines, narrates, and indeed speaks for as it seeks to pull them ever more closely. Whether or not a large number of expatriates indeed embark on the journey homewards and regardless of their (un)-successful re-integration into the host society, the role played by the home-state in (re)-producing its sought-after professionals abroad must be properly analyzed and carefully unpacked.

Methodologically, the paper employs a critical discourse analysis of publicly available primary and secondary historical source materials pertaining to return programs. Primary materials include

relevant Knesset proceedings (1949–2010) and protocols of the Parliamentary Committees of the Interior (1949–1974) and Immigration and Absorption (1974–2010), which are commonly regarded as the most important political forums for migration-related policy-making in Israel. Secondary materials include pertinent state-sanctioned documents, including official memoranda, policy papers and evaluation reports of return programs as well as websites of partners, both public and private, to these initiatives. Data collected were analyzed based on the historical time period at which they were produced, their expressed 'ideological' justification for state-assisted return (for example, national/professional) and key attributes of potential returnees, primarily their perceived contribution (for example ethno-demographic, economic) to the Jewish collective in the territorial nation-state.

The paper is organized in four parts. First, current research is set within the broader theoretical literature on diaspora strategies and return migration policies. The second part describes emigration in the Israeli context, arguing that the state has been pursuing a dual strategy of maintaining ties with and repatriation of migrants in general, and the highly-skilled in particular. Tracing the roots of the state's strategy, which is termed 'maintain/return', and examining its leading principles, this section briefly maps out the contested nature of migration policy-making in Israel. The third part critically analyzes the changing public discourse toward return migration in Israel, illustrating that the gradual transformation from a 'national' to a 'professional' return was rooted within broader political–economic processes taking place in Israel. The paper concludes by discussing the potential benefits of re-focusing scholarly gaze on states' return strategies, highlighting the broader implications of the Israeli case.

### Claiming extra-territorial groups: diaspora or sending state strategies

The circular character of migration, particularly among highly-skilled individuals whose departure is no longer understood as a final loss of capital for countries of origin, has motivated states to invest considerable efforts to re-solidify ties with ethnic populations abroad, either non-resident citizens or diasporic communities.<sup>8</sup> Recent decades have witnessed a record number of states in developing, transitional and developed countries, pursuing closer relations with extra-territorial groups, often bestowing upon them a wide range of political, civic, socio-cultural and economic rights as part of gradually widening regimes of transnational re-inclusion.<sup>9</sup> Ranging from dual citizenship and absentee voting to diasporic investment incentives,<sup>10</sup> these rights, often seen as *bonding mechanisms* geared toward symbolic or material re-incorporation of the diaspora, constitute key policy instruments in what some have called 'diaspora strategies'.<sup>11</sup> Driven by states' desire to reap economic and political benefits (for example, enhanced remittances and strong host-land lobbying) from

<sup>6</sup> N. Cohen, Come home, be professional: ethno-nationalism and economic rationalism in Israel's return migration strategy, *Immigrants & Minorities* 27 (2009) 1–28.

<sup>7</sup> T. Faist, Migrants as transnational development agents: an inquiry into the newest round of the migration-development nexus, *Population, Space, and Place* 14 (2008) 21–42.

<sup>8</sup> R. Cohen, *Global Diasporas: An Introduction*, 2nd Edition, London and New York, 2008; J. Itzigsohn, Immigration and the boundaries of citizenship: the institutions of immigrants' political transnationalism, *International Migration Review* 34 (2000) 1126–1154; P. Levitt and R. de la DeHesa, Transnational migration and the redefinition of the state: variations and explanations, *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 26 (2003) 587–611; P. Levitt and N. Glick-Schiller, Conceptualizing simultaneity: a transnational social field perspective on society, *International Migration Review* 38 (2004) 1002–1039.

<sup>9</sup> K. Barry, Home and away: the construction citizenship in an emigration context, *NYU Law Review* 81 (2006) 11–59; M.P. Smith and L.E. Guarnizo, *Transnationalism From Below*, New Brunswick, 1998.

<sup>10</sup> R. Bauböck, Expansive citizenship – voting beyond territory and membership, *PS: Political Science & Politics* 38 (2005) 683–687; I. Bloemraad, Who claims dual citizenship? The limits of postnationalism, the possibilities of transnationalism, and the persistence of traditional citizenship, *International Migration Review* 38 (2004) 389–426; P.J. Spiro, Dual nationality and the meaning of citizenship, *Emory Law Journal* 46 (1997) 491–565; J.M. Brinkerhoff, Creating an enabling environment for diasporas' participation in homeland development, *International Migration* 50 (2012) 75–95; A. Smart and J.Y. Hsu, The Chinese diaspora, foreign investment and economic development in China, *Review of International Affairs* 3 (2004) 544–566.

<sup>11</sup> A. Chander, Diaspora bonds, *NYU Law Review*, 76 (2001) 1005–1099; A. Delphin, M. Boyle and R. Kitchin, *Exploring Diaspora Strategies: An International Comparison*, Maynooth, 2009.

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