

The mass immigrations to Israel: A comparison of the failure of the Mizrahi immigrants of the 1950s with the success of the Russian immigrants of the 1990s

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The two mass immigrations to Israel are compared, demonstrating the failure of the Mizrahi immigrants of the 1950s versus the success of the Russian immigrants of the 1990s. Almost in every respect the Russian immigrants had advantages over the Mizrahi immigrants: they arrived with greater human resources, the state was more affluent and less discriminatory against them, the society was more culturally open and socially tolerant, and their proportion in the total population was much smaller and hence not threatening. Whereas the Mizrahim lost their culture and ended up in the lower strata of society, Russian immigrants are in the process of entering the middle class and in control of the pace and rate of their assimilation.

Keywords: immigration; Mizrahim; Ashkenazim; Russian immigrants; Israeli society

Israel experienced two waves of mass immigration, one in the 1950s and another in the 1990s. About one million new immigrants arrived in each wave. In the earlier wave half of the immigrants came from Europe-America (Ashkenazim) and half from Asia-Africa (Mizrahim, Sephardim). In the later wave over 90% were Ashkenazim from the former Soviet Union (FSU) and the rest came from the Asiatic parts of the former Soviet Union, Ethiopia, and other non-European areas. Although half of the immigrants in the 1950s were Ashkenazim, at the time of their arrival and in the ensuing decades, these European Jews were not considered to be problematic by the 630,000 old-timers of whom 77% were Ashkenazim. For this reason the first mass immigration is seen as Mizrahi and contrasted with the second Ashkenazi Russian mass immigration. The comparison between the two waves may be instructive with regard to issues of immigration and immigrant integration and the impact of immigrants on the host society.

Conceptual framework

The comparison will be based on the following conceptual framework. Each wave of immigration will be traced at three points in time: the initial setting prior to the encounter with old-timers, the encounter dynamics during the first decade, and the situation several decades thereafter. The process that takes place over this extended time scale is conceived of as a continuum ranging from ethnic formation to assimilation. The immigrant group may assimilate culturally and socially but also may gradually evolve as a separate ethnic group. The relative progress of these competing developments determines the position of the immigrant group on the continuum.

The various conditions conducive for assimilation can be classified into variables relating to the immigrants themselves, the old-timers, and the society at large.¹

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Looming large among the factors relating to the immigrants is their desire to assimilate. Another factor is numerical size and degree of geographical dispersion in the host society, the smaller the number of immigrants and the wider their dispersion, the greater are their chances of assimilation. Cultural resemblance to the old-timers is another assimilating factor. Human and material capital is an additional stimulus for assimilation because it enables the immigrants to achieve social mobility and to join the dominant group. Another asset is the existence of social networks of friends and relatives among the old-timers who can help the newcomer. Finally, visibility of the immigrant can be a stumbling block because it marks off the immigrant from the old-timer, restrains contact, and inhibits assimilation.

Assimilation, or rather a shift from an immigrant group to an ethnic group, also depends on the orientation of the old-timers and the state. Old-timers who do not perceive newcomers as a threat and who are open to immigrants' mixing and amalgamation will produce greater rates of assimilation. Assimilation is expedited by economic growth and by state policies that promote equality and assimilation between newcomers and old-timers.

Different types of non-dominant populations may live in mass-settler or immigrant societies such as the United States, Canada, and Australia: immigrants, native peoples, national minorities, and sojourners. The most assimilating of these categories are immigrants. If temporary residents such as foreign workers settle down informally or illegally, they are barred from being absorbed into the veteran population because of their unlawful status, lower socioeconomic position, and marginalization. Continued abode in their native homelands enables indigenous peoples and national minorities to sustain their identities, cultures, and communities. None of these groups is obliged to adjust to the host society on old-timers' terms. On the other hand, immigrants are both willing and obligated to assimilate in exchange for the benefits bestowed on them, and in case of disappointment they have the choice of returning to their countries of origin. Displaced and cut off from their natural habitat, immigrants are highly susceptible to assimilation.

While assimilation has been the trend and dominant ideology in Western societies, since the 1970s the West has faced the challenge of multiculturalism and new immigrants who are less prepared to assimilate. Immigrants have shown resistance to full assimilation and taken action to retain parts of their cultural heritage and identity, drawing on the ideology of multiculturalism to legitimize their demand for cultural rights.² The globalization of communications, the economy, and culture prevents their isolation from their countries of origin and enables them to maintain ramified cross-country connections and to establish themselves as transnational communities.³

Although multiculturalism enjoys considerable prestige and sympathy in the West, its meanings, benefits, and drawbacks are fiercely debated.⁴ Multiculturalism in the United States means racial inclusion and equality, in Great Britain it conveys the absorption of the former colonial subjects in a newly defined British nation, and in Germany the struggle over multiculturalism is over the transition toward a civic German nation that fully and equally contains non-ethnic Germans.⁵ Multiculturalism fosters politics of identity, and in cases where a set of common core values is weak and some of the constituent groups are illiberal, it breeds estrangement and disunity. Furthermore, it diminishes the salience of the fight for equal opportunity, fair distribution of resources, and proportional political representation.

For these reasons there is a "return to assimilation" in the West, although less sweeping and repressive than it was before the 1970s. According to Brubaker, the new conception of assimilation is a continuous process rather than an end-product and applies more to the

immigrants' children than to the immigrants themselves.⁶ It is selective, multidimensional, and unintentional. It is compatible with retention of the immigrants' language and culture as a second language and as a subculture. The old conception of assimilation was abandoned by the social sciences and by Western societies. Assimilation in the twenty-first century is reconcilable with "thin multiculturalism" or with what Kymlicka calls "liberal multiculturalism."⁷

My analysis of the two mass immigrations to Israel stresses several points. First, Jewish immigrants to Israel are an assimilable group and, like immigrants to other immigrant societies, they assimilate culturally and socially in one way or another. Multiculturalism in the sense of group separation applies only minimally to Jewish immigrants in Israel, but it holds true for Orthodox and ultra-Orthodox Jews, Palestinian Arab citizens, and foreign workers.⁸ Second, despite a certain degree of assimilation, the Mizrahi mass immigration of the 1950s evolved as a new permanent ethnic group due to its concentration in the lower classes. And third, the Russian mass immigration of the 1990s will eventually assimilate into the Ashkenazi veteran group rather than form a separate ethnic group. There are favorable conditions for the long-run assimilation of the Russian immigrants despite the creation of an ethnic enclave in the 1990s. These differences substantiate my overall thesis that the Mizrahi wave of immigration was a failure while the Russian wave of the 1990s was a success.

The two waves of mass immigration to Israel occurred in completely different settings. At the time of the Mizrahi immigration of the 1950s, the old assimilationist version of assimilation was hegemonic in the social sciences, politics, and society, whereas the Russian immigration of the 1990s enjoyed an atmosphere of moderate or nuanced assimilation that resonates with liberal multiculturalism. But the decisive factor is not the atmosphere but rather the actual conditions conducive to assimilation which were more favorable in the case of the Russian immigration than in the case of the Mizrahi immigration.⁹

The Mizrahi immigrants of the 1950s

From its proclamation in 1948 to the end of 1964, Israel absorbed 1,213,555 immigrants, of whom 648,160 (53%) were from Muslim countries, divided between 294,722 who came from Asia and 353,438 from North Africa.¹⁰ Asian Jews (mostly from Yemen, Iraq and Iran) arrived in the first few years of statehood, settled in or close to the urban centers, and enjoyed better social services, while North African Jews (mostly from Morocco, Libya and Tunisia) arrived later, were directed to the periphery, and given poorer resources.

The story of the Mizrahi immigrants of the 1950s is essentially a story of failure. Given their own characteristics, the old-timers' orientation, and the state's abilities and policies, they had slim chances of succeeding in Israel, and their performance was indeed poor in both the short and the long run.

Initial setting

On the whole, the conditions in Israel and the characteristics of old-timers at the beginning of the mass immigration of Mizrahim in the 1950s were conducive to unsuccessful immigrant absorption.

State and society

Mizrahim took little part in the Zionist project leading to the creation of a new Jewish society in Palestine and the State of Israel. Zionism emerged in Europe in response to the

crisis in Jewish life there. The Westernized and secularized Jews in Western Europe faced anti-Semitism despite their advanced assimilation, while the Jews in Eastern Europe were not granted civil rights and were persecuted and excluded from the rising ethno-national movements there. Zionism rose in Europe as a national-liberation movement to save Ashkenazi Jews by building a Jewish homeland for them in Palestine.

Jews in Muslim lands did not endure a parallel crisis. Their partial shift to an industrial economy and European culture did not engender a clash with the predominantly traditional societies in which they had lived for generations. They also benefited from the European colonialism of Middle Eastern regions by availing themselves of community education, employment in the colonial administration, and expanding trade opportunities. Domestic nationalism and European Zionism were not relevant to their lives.¹¹ Moreover, the Zionist movement did not regard Eastern Jewry as a target for its activities. It did not establish branches, raise funds, or recruit immigrants in Muslim countries. It had low expectations of, and little regard for, Eastern and Sephardic Jews because at the turn of the twentieth century they constituted less than one-tenth of world Jewry, lacked wealth and power, and were looked down upon as culturally inferior.¹²

Non-European Jews were similarly marginal in the *Yishuv* (the Jewish community in Palestine), comprising only 12% of the pre-state immigrants and even less among the “pioneers,” the staunch Zionists engaged in settling and defending the land and in other nation-building endeavors. Ashkenazim built the *Yishuv* according to their visions, values, and needs and became the dominant “charter” group – the nation- and state-building collectivity that “runs” and controls the land, society, and culture. They formed a new Jew, a new Jewish society, and a new Jewish culture. The new Jew was conceived by the ruling Labor movement as modern, secular, productive, committed to collective goals, close to nature and the land, assertive, conformist, and unselfish.¹³ This new Jew was the carrier of the new Jewish culture, which was locally made, grounded in the Hebrew language, detached from Ashkenazi life in the diaspora, and composed of both Western and non-Western elements.

Mizrahi Jews lived on the margins of the *Yishuv*. They were divided into numerous small, local, ethnic communities, attached to a semi-traditional way of life, employed in low-status jobs, and devoid of good public services.¹⁴ The efforts made by some of their leaders to gain power by forming ethnic election lists failed.¹⁵ Unlike the ultra-Orthodox community who rejected in principle the Zionist nation-building project, Mizrahim identified themselves with it but were treated as an irrelevant or inferior component in the grand design. The treatment of the Yemenite Jews is an exception that proved the rule. In 1907 leaders of the *Yishuv* organized immigration from Yemen as part of the struggle for “Jewish labor.” Seen as Arabized Jews, Yemenite workers were expected to compete successfully with cheap and efficient Arab workers.¹⁶ The failure of the program caused by the Yemenite workers’ refusal to accept the low wages paid to Arab workers as compared with the higher wages paid to Ashkenazi workers brought the organized immigration from Yemen to a halt. Throughout the pre-state period the religious and traditional Yemenite immigrants were rejected as equal members in new communities formed by the Ashkenazi pioneers.¹⁷

The *Yishuv*’s attitude toward Mizrahi Jewry changed immediately prior to and after the establishment of the Jewish state. The intensification of the Jewish-Arab conflict in Palestine destabilized the position of Jews in Arab countries.¹⁸ After the Arab defeat in the 1948 war, Jews became hostages in the hands of the Arab military dictatorships, and there was even fear of another Holocaust. At the same time it became clear that the preferred reservoir of Ashkenazi immigrants had been severely depleted after the extermination

of six million European Jews, the ban on immigration from the communist bloc, and the reluctance of Western Jews to immigrate. Israel, which had declared itself as the homeland of the Jewish people and enacted the Law of Return, could not refuse the entry of Mizrahi Jews, and by admitting them it also fulfilled its supreme mission of the “ingathering of exiles.”

These developments that underpinned the Mizrahi mass immigration after 1948 were reinforced by the dependence of the new fledgling Jewish state on a continuing flow of immigrants for meeting its urgent needs. The war had ended with ceasefire agreements but the Arab world remained belligerent. The small Ashkenazi Jewish population felt exhausted. A solid demographic base was essential to make Israel a viable state. A growing number of Jews would project an image of strength, enlarge the military, and decrease the national security burden per capita. During the war Israel seized 78% of the land of Mandatory Palestine, from which about 750,000 Palestinians left, either in flight from the fighting or driven out by force. It was under international pressure to cede the newly occupied territories (42% of Israel’s area in 1949) and to let the Arab refugees return. The rapid settlement of these territories by Jews, strengthened by an influx of immigrants, was the stock Zionist answer. Population increase was also a means for the economic growth needed for raising living standards. Expansion of the middle class, the mainstay of a stable democracy, would require additional population growth.

In view of its Zionist commitment to free Jewish immigration, Israel’s indirect responsibility for the deteriorated status of Jews in the Arab world, and its dire need for immigrants in order to cope with its exigencies, it could not refuse to admit the Mizrahi communities knocking on its doors. David Ben-Gurion, Israel’s nation-builder and first prime minister, made the fateful decision to allow mass immigration to Israel. The decision was generally implemented but with one noteworthy exception. In response to the public pressure to regulate the flow and quality of immigrants, the government adopted a policy that preferred persons up to age 35 who were healthy, willing to work in agriculture during the first two years of arrival, and self-supporting or with support from Israeli relatives.¹⁹ This policy was in force only during 1952–54 and curbed to some extent the immigration from Iran and Morocco, but overall Israel carried out the vision of the ingathering of exiles for which it had been established.

Israel was built as a centralized state, managed by a coalition government, dominated by a single political party, Mapai (Labor Party), and ruled by a semi-authoritarian leader. Mapai controlled all political centers of power and the economy. Ben-Gurion created and propagated a new ideology known as “statism” (*mamlakhtiyut*) that stressed the need to serve the new Jewish state and volunteer for its urgent missions rather than work on behalf of oneself or one’s family, community, or party. The state had therefore the will, power, and legitimacy to mobilize the population, including the newcomers, to execute its immediate tasks.

Old-timers

Since Israel was a new state, it was obviously ruled by the old-timers defined as persons who had been born in the country or had arrived before 1948. They were divided into political camps and social classes. One major segment of the population belonged to the middle class and supported centrist and right-wing parties, but the predominant segment occupied working-class positions and allied itself with the dominant Labor parties. Before and during the 1948, the old-timers endured painful deprivations and expected the new state to compensate them for their contribution to the Zionist project and for their suffering.

The overwhelming majority of the old-timers were Ashkenazi. They saw their newly formed culture as belonging to advanced Western cultures. Imbued with a European and colonial spirit, they regarded the Arabs as culturally backward and Mizrahim as Arabized Jews.²⁰ They believed in the potential of Mizrahim to secularize, to rid themselves of their Arab backwardness, and to absorb the mainstream culture. Their approach to the immigrants was strictly assimilationist, repressive, and impatient. They expected them to immediately discard their diaspora heritage and to assimilate culturally and socially. The full admission of the immigrant to the new Jewish society was conditional on radical personal transformation and adoption of the model of the new Jew.²¹

The mass immigration of Mizrahi Jews was received by Ashkenazi old-timers with mixed feelings. They thought that any immigrant was an asset to the new Jewish state, but they had neither expected nor wanted so many Mizrahi immigrants. The marginality of Mizrahim in the *Yishuv* was a precedent that augured ill for the new immigrants. The immense volume of immigration (the population doubled during 1948–52) caused food and housing shortages, unemployment, and the near collapse of state services.²² The old-timers regarded the appearance and customs of the Mizrahi newcomers as strange and inferior²³ and soon became alarmed by the dangers of Mizrahi immigration to the new Jewish society and state – demographic swamping, cultural erosion, and breakdown of democracy. The precious Zionist project that had been constructed for over fifty years was in jeopardy. These widespread fears prompted the government to practice the above-mentioned policy of selective immigration. Yet, the alleviation of the old-timers' apprehensions required preventing the new Mizrahi immigrants from becoming a major force in Israeli society in order to insure the old-timers' continued control of state and society.

Immigrants

At first glance Mizrahim would seem to have enjoyed certain definite advantages at the time of their arrival in Israel. Regarded as returnees from the diaspora to the homeland, they shared with old-timers a preexisting identity, religion, peoplehood, and interdependence of fate. Their sheer numbers, which equaled the veteran population, should have empowered them appreciably in a small democratic state like Israel. They also came to a country undergoing tremendous expansion in all spheres of life and which needed them badly.

These apparent strengths were greatly offset by several major weaknesses. Mizrahi immigrants were de facto refugees. When the Jewish state was proclaimed, the ancient Jewish communities in the East were redefined in their countries of origin as enemy-affiliated minorities and forced to leave as a result of intensified hate, discrimination, and persecution. They emigrated to Israel because it was virtually their only option (except for the few with wealth and Western connections, such as Algerian Jews with French citizenship who emigrated to France). Once they arrived in Israel, they could not leave: they were unable to return to their countries of origin, which were legally defined as enemy lands, and did not have the choice of proceeding to other countries. Their de facto refugee status handicapped Mizrahi immigrants vis-à-vis the old-timers and the Jewish state. Their closed options before and after immigration deprived them of any negotiating power.

Another disadvantage was cultural distance. Mizrahi Jews espoused a Judeo-Arab language and culture, which in most cases was non-European and non-secular, and did not know modern Hebrew. Phenomena such as nationalism, the Protestant ethic, bureaucratic procedures, the industrial economy, technical and non-intimate interpersonal contacts,

gender equality, the centrality of the child in the family, and so forth, were remote for most of them. They also differed in appearance and manners from the old-timers. This enormous cultural distance from the old-timers, which was stigmatized as cultural backwardness and inferiority, was a real stumbling block for the proper functioning of Mizrahim in their new country. One cultural liability that cannot be overemphasized was family size. Mizrahim came with large families, at least twice as large as old-timers' families. Their big households had a detrimental effect on child rearing, housing, education, social mobility, and income and wealth per capita.

Mizrahim arrived without material capital and with low human capital. They were either poor or had been forced to leave their property behind. They lacked the most crucial asset necessary for social mobility in an industrial society – diplomas of secular education. The religious schooling that many men possessed did not count in secular Israel. Their educational level was much lower than that of the old-timers'. Moreover, upon arrival, Mizrahim did not find a social network to rely on. Without relatives, friends, and acquaintances among the old-timers, they could not count on old-timers for good advice, guidance, assistance, troubleshooting, and intercession.

All these disadvantages combined to make Mizrahi immigrants highly vulnerable. Their ability to withstand the pressures of the old-timers and the state was limited, and their chances to succeed in their new society were slim.

Encounter dynamics

The encounter between the Mizrahi immigrants and the Ashkenazi old-timers under the auspices of the Ashkenazi-controlled Jewish state, beset by so many problems, was clearly asymmetric. It was a classic case of contact and competition between weak and strong populations, leading to the emergence of a low-status Mizrahi ethnic group instead of equality and assimilation.

Mizrahi immigrants were admitted to Israel as Jews and accorded Israeli citizenship upon arrival. As citizens they enjoyed all civil and political rights. They could organize, vote and be elected to all public offices, and wage a struggle for improving their living conditions. However, the Mizrahim were unable to utilize the great potential for accumulation of power inherent in their immense numbers and the immediate granting of citizenship because of several structural impediments. As noted, their negotiating power was greatly reduced by their de facto refugee status. Moreover, the state was very strong and civil society was quite weak. The immigrants were dependent not only on the state for services but also on the Histadrut (Federation of Labor) for providing basic services such as health, employment, and other welfare services. Mapai, the left-wing Mapam Party, and the Mafdal (National-Religious Party) had strong party machines which deeply penetrated the immigrant communities, co-opted their leaders, and blocked any initiative of independent and militant mobilization on their part. Mapai, the ruling party, affected the fate of the immigrants by its control of the state, the Histadrut, the Jewish Agency, and numerous organizations in the civil society. It administered a policy of unequal incorporation and co-optation rather than egalitarian pluralism.

A separate bureaucracy in the Jewish Agency was established to deal with immigrant absorption in addition to the immigration administration. The Jewish Agency checked and screened the new immigrants, gave them very basic home equipment and an initial sum of money, and dispatched them to a particular locality (a neighborhood in a city, a small town, or a moshav). Since public resources were limited and the number of immigrants

was large, the amount of assistance to an immigrant family was minimal. Immigrants had to live in temporary housing and in areas where municipal services were poor.

The state practiced a policy of rapid development and full employment. The enormous imports of capital (German reparations, American grants-in-aid, contributions from the Jewish diaspora, loans) were invested in infrastructures, industrial development, and basic services (housing and education). Wages and public services were deliberately kept low. Development projects were entrusted to institutional entrepreneurs (officials working for the state, Histadrut, or Jewish Agency) or private investors who were heavily subsidized by the government. Officials, investors, contractors, suppliers and other highly placed people profited from these development ventures. The housing, education, culture, and health and welfare services provided to the immigrants generated a large number of professional and semi-professional jobs, but it was the Ashkenazi old-timers who were the main beneficiaries of the skilled, entrepreneurial, and high-income jobs.²⁴

The Mizrahi immigrants were given the unskilled and low-income jobs. The government was committed to full employment of Jews. The Arab citizens were placed under military administration, officially for security reasons but unofficially also to prevent them from competing with Jewish immigrants for employment. It was believed that people should work for their living and should not be paid welfare so that they would not become poor and dependent on the public. For this reason there was no unemployment insurance during the 1950s, and the unemployed had to see a social worker in order to receive a small welfare allowance. The government and the Jewish National Fund created low-paying relief works for the immigrants. By taking these degrading makeshift jobs, the immigrants were prevented from seeking and pressing for suitable employment. Additional jobs were created by building textile factories and other productive plants in immigrant towns and by providing temporary agricultural work in the surrounding kibbutzim. Many Mizrahi immigrants had to make do with these dead-end jobs for many years.²⁵

A system of ethnic stratification emerged. The Mizrahi immigrants with their low level of education, inadequate knowledge of Hebrew, lack of connections, ethnic discrimination, and poor opportunities and services in their localities entered the low-ranking positions in the private labor market, civil service, schools, military, and politics, while the Ashkenazi veterans were displaced upwards in all areas of life. This ethnic hierarchy was reinforced by a periphery–center division. The Mizrahi immigrants were placed in the periphery of the country and in the inner cities and were doubly discriminated against as new immigrants and as residents of the periphery.

The Mizrahi mass immigration of the 1950s helped to alleviate Israel's urgent problems. The Mizrahi immigrants enhanced the Jewish demographic base, as well as the military and the economy. They partially settled the areas evacuated by the Palestinian refugees. Israel even presented the Mizrahi mass immigration as part of a population exchange – it had absorbed Jewish refugees from Arab countries and they in turn should absorb the Arab refugees from Palestine. The Ashkenazi old-timers gained upward mass mobility as a result of the mass immigration, pushing the Mizrahi immigrants to the lower echelons of society. These Mizrahi contributions to the country were made without undermining Israeli democracy, the national Hebrew culture, and the old-timers' control, and without the state's and old-timers' acknowledgement of the Mizrahi input. On the contrary, in the Ashkenazi collective memory, the Mizrahi immigrants are considered ungrateful for what the old-timers did for them – rescued them from persecution in the Arab world, shared with them the state's meager resources, and treated them fairly.²⁶

The strong assimilationist policies were effective. The Mizrahim's culture was officially labeled inferior and they came under heavy pressure to discard it. The older

immigrants, stigmatized as “a generation of the desert” and “human dust,” were badly hurt and humiliated. The young were expected to use Hebrew and to absorb Israeli culture through the schools, military, media, and the workplace. They were accepted on condition they disown their parents’ heritage and emulate the Ashkenazi Sabra model. The Mizrahi immigrants were deprived of any legitimacy to preserve their culture, and deprived of any means for retaining connections with the lifeline of their Judeo-Arab culture – the Arab countries from where most of them came. Their culture entered on a trajectory of disintegration and replacement by the Israeli-Hebrew culture.

However, social assimilation between Mizrahi immigrants and Ashkenazi old-timers did not occur as expected. The two groups mixed in the impersonal public domain (workplaces, buses, streets, hospitals, etc.) but not in the more significant interpersonal arenas (schools, neighborhoods, friendships, families). The rising ethnic divide between the two populations began to blur the ethnic boundaries within each of them. Geographical proximity, class resemblance, and cultural affinity slowly diminished the salience of country of origin and ushered in the formation of a Mizrahi ethnic group as distinct from an Ashkenazi ethnic group.

The Mizrahi immigrants’ mobilization and protest were quite moderate. Demonstrations, petitions, and ethnic election lists to local government and the Knesset were readily suppressed. The most significant landmark event was the Wadi Salib riot of July 1959 when Moroccan residents of a Haifa slum clashed with the police and raided the business center in protest against poverty, unemployment, and ethnic discrimination. The unrest was contained but sounded an alarm that a real ethnic problem was simmering under the surface, with occasional outbursts.²⁷ In their daily behavior and sporadic protest, Mizrahi immigrants conveyed a clear integrationist orientation, neither separatist nor disloyal. They demanded improvements in their situation and more acceptance by Ashkenazim but did not reject the Israeli-Jewish-Zionist system and did not collaborate with the Arabs either inside or outside the country.²⁸

Long-term outcomes

Five decades after the arrival and absorption of the Mizrahi immigrants to Israel, it is possible to assess their long-term impacts. The evident failure of the assimilationist model thwarted the melting-pot vision of the complete amalgamation of all immigrants into a new, ethnically undifferentiated Israeli Jew. Yet the outcomes are a complex mix of ethnic assimilation and separation and diverse repercussions for Israeli society as a whole.²⁹

One cardinal impact of Mizrahi immigrants is the formation of a Mizrahi–Ashkenazi divide in Israeli society. During the pre-state period the Jewish population was officially categorized into Ashkenazim, members of *Edot ha-Mizrah* (Eastern Communities), Sephardim, and Yemenites. There was no single category of Mizrahim but rather many Eastern communities that were distinguished from Ladino-speaking Jews and Yemenites. In the 1950s, country of origin was the most salient ethnic category, but since then three melting pots have been in operation. The envisioned and hoped-for melting pot has created a brand-new, ethnically indistinguishable Israeli Jew out of a blend of Ashkenazim and non-Ashkenazim. But this melting pot is smaller than the other two. The largest and most successful melting pot has created new Ashkenazi Israelis out of Polish, Russian, Romanian, German, and other European-American Jews. These Jews are close to each other in culture and socioeconomic status and feel a commonality of fate. They intermarry among themselves so freely that they no longer regard marriage between the different Ashkenazi groups as intermarriage. The other large melting pot has produced the new

ethnic group of Mizrahi Israelis out of Iraqi, Yemenite, Moroccan, and other Asian-African Jews. They also share a similar culture and class and certain common interests, although Mizrahim are still more diverse and divided than Ashkenazim.³⁰

The small size of the ethnically undifferentiated melting pot as compared to the other two melting pots indicates that both emergent ethnicity and ethnic assimilation have been at work since 1948 in Israeli society and that the consolidation of Ashkenazim and Mizrahim into two separate groups is more significant than the assimilation between them. In the first decade of the twenty-first century the two ethnic groups occupy different class positions.³¹ Most Ashkenazim belong to the middle and higher strata while a majority of Mizrahim belong to the working and lower strata. Ethnic stratification passes from one generation to another. Although there is nearly equal representation of Ashkenazim and Mizrahim in the political and military elites, there is only a limited Mizrahi presence in the economic, managerial, cultural, and academic elites. Mizrahim's penetration of the political and military elites is due both to their large numbers in these fields, where numbers count, and to the gradual Ashkenazi shift to other spheres where merit and reward have become greater. While the two groups share the Israeli-Hebrew core culture, they differ significantly in subculture, such as accent, identity, religious observance, lifestyles, and personality predispositions. Their collective memory is divisive: Mizrahim accuse Ashkenazim, and especially the Labor movement, for their maltreatment and current predicament, while Ashkenazim feel innocent and expect Mizrahim to be grateful for what was done for them. Ashkenazim feel superior in talents and culture toward Mizrahim. Ethnic separation is still appreciable in various areas of life.

Nonetheless, the Mizrahi–Ashkenazi division is not as deep as that between religious and secular Jews or between Arab and Jewish citizens because it lacks an ideological base, fundamental disputes, institutional separation, delegitimation of the other, and mass mobilization. It augments, however, the susceptibility of Israeli society to conflict and disunity by adding an ethnic dimension to the political and class cleavages.

Mizrahi immigrants reinforced national resilience. They increased the Jewish population and made Israel more viable in Jewish and Arab eyes. They strengthened national security by expanding the military and by taking part in all post-state wars and low-intensity conflicts. They added their share to the Jewish settlement of the Galilee, the Negev, former Arab towns and villages, and the post-1967 occupied areas.

Mizrahi immigrants helped enlarge the Israeli economy and were integrated into its lower rungs. Since the mid-1980s the Israeli economy has been undergoing liberalization (deregulation, privatization, and compliance with the guidelines laid down by the Maastricht Treaty with regard to monetary and budgetary policies), a transition to high technology, and globalization (multinationals, foreign workers, mobility of capital). Mizrahim are hard hit by the growing inequalities and decline of the traditional economy, which are the byproducts of these changes, but they lack the consciousness, ideology, leadership, and power to mobilize against the new developments, let alone to stop them. They are not a real factor in shaping the Israeli economy, even when its transformation affects them directly.

The overall impact of Mizrahi immigrants on Israeli culture is limited because they, and especially their children who were born or raised in Israel, lost their original Judeo-Arab culture and assimilated the Israeli-Hebrew culture. They have made three distinct cultural contributions, however. First, Mizrahim have contributed many elements to the common Israeli-Hebrew culture, such as foods, music, jewelry, and entertainment, as well as an ethnic literature. Second, they have diversified Israeli-Hebrew culture with a host of Iraqi, Yemenite, Moroccan, Iranian, and other subcultures, parallel to the Polish, German,

Romanian, and Anglo-Saxon subcultures of the Ashkenazim. Mizrahi subcultures have Judeo-Arab residues and folk ingredients. All these cultural contributions are local adaptations, rather than original patterns. And third, a totally new Mizrahi subculture has emerged, which transcends the various Mizrahi subcultures and countries of origin. It is an Israeli-made product that incorporates Arab, Mediterranean, and Judaic influences. It is essentially a proletarian culture, reflecting the life-situation of Mizrahim in the lower classes, and includes a variety of elements such as extrovert behavior, warmth, self-adornment, a guttural Hebrew accent, "Mizrahi music," ethnic foods, inexpensive leisure habits, folk religion (special religious celebrations known as *hilulot*, the cult of holy men, amulets, folk medicine), hypersensitivity to personal honor, selective and inconsistent (from an Orthodox point of view) observance of religion, right-wing political views, and a hatred of Arabs. Underlying the Mizrahi subculture is a bitter collective memory of repression and degradation by the Labor movement in the 1950s and a sense of animosity and a desire for revenge. It is a subculture that is labeled as inferior and irrational and avoided by Mizrahim of the middle and higher classes.

Mizrahim have influenced Israeli society by strengthening the religious sector and supporting the centrality of religion in public life. During their Israelization process Mizrahi immigrants drifted away from religion, but most of them did not secularize. Mizrahim do not harbor ideological antagonism to religion and most observe religious traditions selectively. This persistent Mizrahi attraction to religion accounts for the fact that most Mizrahi voters for the ultra-Orthodox Shas party are not ultra-Orthodox or even Orthodox. Their adherence to religion strengthens Orthodox Jewry and the continued cardinal role of religion in the public domain. Shas has become the main force fighting for religion and religious interests, aiming, among other things, to bring Mizrahim back to religion, to block initiatives to enact a state constitution and basic laws, to criticize and reduce the powers of the Supreme Court, to campaign against foreign workers and non-Jewish immigrants, and to curb Western influences.³²

The most noticeable achievement and impact of Mizrahi immigrants were in politics. They shifted their vote from Labor to the right-wing camp and brought the Likud Party to power. Their party realignment transformed Israeli politics from a dominant-party to a two-bloc system, thereby causing ongoing changes of government and democratizing the regime. The high Mizrahi representation in political parties, the Knesset, the government, and other decision-making positions has blurred Ashkenazi political hegemony. During the 1990s Shas became a large party that played a key role in government coalitions. The Mizrahim constitute the backbone of right-wing politics in Israel by voting heavily for right-wing parties, occupying many high positions in those parties, and championing Shas as a Sephardic, ultra-Orthodox, and radical right-wing party.

The Mizrahi alignment with the right and radical right in Israel had had an adverse effect on the quality of democracy, the position of the Arab citizens of Israel, and the peace process. Mizrahim, like other right-wingers, are less committed to civic democracy, more hostile to Israeli and non-Israeli Arabs, and more hawkish than Ashkenazim.³³ Levy also argues that the rise of Mizrahim, along with Orthodox Jews, in Israel's military since the early 1990s is a central factor in the remilitarization of Israel.³⁴

The Mizrahi mass immigration has not turned Israel into a Middle Eastern society. The Arab hope, and Ashkenazi fear, that Mizrahim would Arabize Israel's culture and institutions, destabilize the Israeli regime and society in reaction to discrimination and lower status, and reorient the Jewish state to the Arab world have not been realized. In the 2000s Mizrahim, like Ashkenazim, wish Israel to integrate politically, economically, and culturally into the West, even if this means continued estrangement from the region.³⁵

The Russian immigrants of the 1990s

The first post-state wave of Russian immigration took place in 1968–79, when 162,000 persons emigrated from the Soviet Union to Israel. Most of them came from the peripheral Baltic and Asian republics where Sovietization was weak and Jewish identity persisted. The small number of these immigrants and their strong identification with Israel facilitated their absorption into Israeli society. From 1980 to 1988 only 30,000 Soviet immigrants arrived in Israel, while hundreds of thousands of them left for the West, mostly to the United States, which admitted them as refugees. Israel's pressure on the United States to deny Soviet Jews the privilege of refugee status bore fruit, closing their preferred American option. In the summer of 1989 the wave of mass immigration to Israel commenced and continued for over a decade and a half during which about one million Russian-speaking immigrants arrived.

The Russian mass immigration is overall a success as evidenced in its achievements and impacts.

Initial setting

The conditions in Israel and the characteristics of old-timers at the beginning of the mass Russian immigration in 1989 were relatively positive for immigrant absorption.³⁶

State and society

By the early 1990s Israel was a highly developed country and even considered part of the West although it came close to the bottom of the Western scale in terms of GNP per capita, type of economy, quality of democracy, rule of law, non-separation between religion and state, and the like.³⁷ Its 1985 program to stabilize the economy proved successful. Israel embarked on globalization in various areas, especially in communications, the economy, law, and culture.

In December 1987 the first Palestinian *Intifada* erupted and the state was engaged in repressing it. The hawkish Likud government of 1990–92 aimed to tighten Israeli control over the West Bank and Gaza Strip by expanding Jewish settlement there. The settling of tens of thousands of Russian immigrants across the pre-1967 borders could have made a great difference. But settlement of the occupied territories was not, and could not be defined as, an urgent state goal both because it was not part of the national consensus and because of international opposition. Moreover, by the end of the 1980s the state had lost so much of its power that it could no longer dictate to the immigrants where to live and what to do.

Israel was highly exposed to Western influences. It respected individual rights and tolerated cultural differences. The idea of the melting pot declined. The Ashkenazi-secular Sabra model of the new Israeli Jew had been weakened by the 1973 war and the change of government in 1977. Israeli Jews were open to other competing ideal types.³⁸

By the beginning of the Russian mass immigration, Israel had become less centralistic, more democratic, and more affluent. It had been undergoing the processes of economic liberalization, globalization, and Westernization.³⁹ The combination of globalization, mass immigration, and the Oslo Accords of 1993 underpinned the resumption of economic growth that had stopped in the aftermath of the 1973 war. But the expansion of the economy was not steady; it ended in 1997, suffering a large blow from the recession in the new international economy and the eruption of the Al-Aqsa *Intifada* in 2000, but economic growth resumed again in 2005 despite the continuing *Intifada*. These fluctuations have affected the Russian immigrants like all Israelis.

Old-timers

Half of the veteran population at this time was Ashkenazim, and half Mizrahim, and neither of these groups could claim full control of society and the state. The two-bloc political system made politics very competitive and restrained the power of the divided old-timers vis-à-vis the immigrants.

The old-timers welcomed the Russian immigrants, seeing them as an asset for strengthening Israel's Jewish population, national security, and economy. The enthusiasm about the Russian immigration was expressed not only by heads of the Jewish Agency but also by certain politicians and journalists who publicly conveyed the expectation that the immigrants would serve as safeguards against the alarming rise of the Mizrahi and Arab populations and as bulwarks of the endangered Ashkenazi-Western culture. Mayors of development towns hoped that the settlement of the highly educated immigrants in their towns would diversify the resident population ethnically and upgrade it socio-economically. The Council on Higher Education expected a dramatic rise in the demand for higher education and planned an appreciable increase in admissions by creating a new tier of colleges alongside the existing research universities. The Ministry of Housing, predicting a severe shortage of accommodation, initiated major housing projects to meet the rising demand. Although some radical Mizrahi and Arab circles expressed their fear that a highly skilled mass immigration would intensify competition over jobs and resource allocation, these voices were silenced by invoking national resilience and unity, and the immigrants' potential contribution to a Jewish majority, "high" culture, and the post-industrial economy.⁴⁰

While the melting-pot ideology had been pushed aside, old-timers still believed in the assimilation of immigrants, but this was a liberal and tolerant view of assimilation that allowed the new immigrants to take their time, adapt selectively, retain their language along with Hebrew, and preserve many traditions. Old-timers even condoned the formation of immigrant political parties which participated in local government and the Knesset, regarding them as a transitory and auxiliary tool of immigrant absorption. At the same time, some old-timers feared that the new immigrants would create an ethnic enclave that would inhibit their eventual assimilation and exacerbate internal divisions in Israeli society.⁴¹

Immigrants

The immigrants from the former Soviet Union were de facto refugees. They were displaced by threats to their personal safety, political instability, economic hardships, and anti-Semitism attendant on the breakup of the Soviet Union. They immigrated to Israel quite involuntarily because the doors of Western countries, especially the United States, were closed to them at the time of departure.

Another liability was the high percentage of non-Jews among the immigrants. It is estimated that one-fourth to one-third of the immigrants were not Jewish according to Halakhic law that enjoys monopolistic jurisdiction over the personal status of Jews in Israel. The proportion of Gentiles among the immigrants increased every year and rose to over one-half toward the end of the 1990s. Although qualifying for the same privileges given to every Jewish immigrant, non-Jewish immigrants were less welcome by the general public and would encounter special hardships in fulfilling basic rights such as the right to marriage and burial in a state where Jewish Orthodoxy holds a monopoly on administering these rights.

The approximately one-tenth of the Russian immigrants who are Asian in origin, language and culture suffer from a further disadvantage as they display the less competitive features, such as lower levels of education, large families, and religious observance, that characterized Jewish immigrants from Muslim countries in the 1950s. Excluded from this group are Ashkenazi Jews (and their descendants) who emigrated to the former Asian-Muslim republics from the European parts of the Soviet Union during World War II.⁴²

Aside from these two population groups, the Russian mass immigration was very strong. In sheer numbers, it was very large: one million immigrants, who were equal to about one-fifth of the veteran population. This was the first time in the history of Jewish immigration to Palestine and Israel that so many immigrants had arrived from a single country or from a single linguistic bloc. Since most of the immigrants were adults and accorded Israeli citizenship upon arrival, they possessed enormous electoral power.

Although Russian immigrants came from the post-communist bloc, they were strongly oriented to the West and many saw themselves as Westerners. They shared with the old-timers Western cultural patterns such as the Protestant ethic, secularism, the importance of investment in education and in children, and low fertility, but differed from them in other areas, such as respect for the rule of law and democratic values. Nonetheless, the cultural distance between the immigrants and old-timers was relatively small. The immigrants even felt superior to ordinary Israeli old-timers whom they saw as infected with strong Oriental influences. Their self-confidence and sense of superiority, whether justified or not, could be instrumental for social mobility.

The immigrants' family structure was another asset. They came with small families, either without children or with up to two children. As many of the families came with their elderly parents, there were several adults to care for each child. There were also many single-parent families in which children received a great deal of attention but which also suffered from lower income.

High human capital compensated for the absence of material capital. The immigrants' educational standards were much higher than those of the old-timers, and the proportion of persons with complete university education was much higher than in the veteran population. The proportion of scientists, doctors, engineers, teachers, writers, journalists, musicians and other professionals among them was extremely high. One-tenth of the immigrants came from the three metropolitan centers (Moscow, St. Petersburg and Kiev) that constitute the heartland of the Russian intelligentsia. The immigrants were highly motivated to make every effort to restore their status in Israel to its high pre-immigration level.

In Israel the immigrants had a vital social network to connect to – the successful Russian immigrants who had arrived in the earlier wave of immigration. They could also find relatives and acquaintances among the Ashkenazi old-timers. Thus, they were able to receive advice and help from people already established in the country.

Encounter dynamics

Given the positive balance in the combined forces affecting the chances of immigrant integration, the mass immigration of the 1990s in Israel was very successful. Israel's switch to a direct immigration absorption policy in the 1980s was highly beneficial to the Russian immigrants. According to this new policy, the state provides new immigrants with an "absorption basket" and leaves them to their own devices. They decide where to live, what job to take, and how to spend the money they receive from the government. They are

given money for acquisition of household equipment as well as payment of rent and utilities for a couple of years. The basket also includes highly subsidized mortgages, Hebrew-language classes, tuition fees for higher education, and the like. Since the basket is given to families, multi-generation immigrant families could combine several baskets and thus double or triple family resources. As a result, over 75% of the Russian immigrant families bought their own apartments (which are expensive in Israel) during the first five years of arrival. In addition to the absorption basket, the new immigrants are entitled to all the social benefits that veteran citizens receive, including universal health insurance, despite the fact that as newcomers they did not pay social security fees. They receive special allowances for children, single-parent families, unemployment, old age, disability, and more.

The immigrants' entry into the labor market resulted in downward social mobility, which was to be expected of immigrants coming from an ex-communist to a highly developed economy.⁴³ For example, teachers could not work as teachers because of language difficulties; the skills and experience of ex-Soviet engineers were not equivalent to those of Israeli engineers; and a state with an oversupply of doctors could not possibly double the number of its doctors in several years. Many of the immigrants were therefore absorbed in jobs whose requirements were lower than their formal education, but they slowly and steadily moved up to higher positions or at least earned money to raise their standard of living. Because of their industriousness, motivation, and willingness to accept any kind of work, the rate of unemployment among Russian immigrants was no higher than among old-timers. The immigrants were particularly successful in the high-technology branch of the economy, filling the shortage in skilled manpower and enabling these new, high-salary enterprises to develop.

The Russian immigrants entered various strata in Israeli society, rather than concentrating on the lower rungs of the social scale. Many began at the bottom but advanced quickly. Although some will remain near the bottom, such as those above the age of 55 or single-parent families, their children are able to advance. There was no evidence for ethnic stratification placing the Russian immigrants under the working-class and poor Mizrahi old-timers.

Russian immigrants retained the Russian language and a significant part of their culture. Most had no choice but to acquire the basics of the Hebrew language and Israeli culture in the workplace, school, public institutions, the army, shopping centers, and so forth. Culture and language retention was made possible through their high exposure to the Russian media – newspapers, magazines, and books produced in Israel, and television broadcasts by both Israel and Russia. Specialty stores catering to Russian immigrants abound in every town with a concentration of Russian immigrants, and parents organize extracurricular activities in Russian for schoolchildren.

A Russian community has emerged in Israel, conscious of its separate interests, outlooks and power, and it has become a basis for high political mobilization. Two right-wing parties for immigrants were active in Israeli politics by the end of the 1990s. In the 1999 elections to the Knesset the Russian parties won half of the Russian vote and ten of the 120 seats. Russian parties participated in all coalition governments formed in 1996–2001. In the 2006 elections a Russian party on the far right, Yisrael Beiteinu (Israel Our Home), won eleven seats (about half of the Russian immigrants' vote) and joined the coalition government.⁴⁴

The Russian community exhibited certain transnational features. In addition to daily viewing of Russian television broadcasts, Russian immigrants maintained strong ties with relatives and friends in the former Soviet Union through visits, telephone calls, and Internet messages. Some immigrants also engaged in economic activities with their former country.

Long-term outcomes

It is of course still too early to assess the long-term outcomes of the Russian mass immigration that began in 1989 and continued to flow in the 2000s. The fifteen years since 1989 are a transitory period that does not necessarily represent the potential developments in the next twenty-five years. However, two conflicting theses with regard to the future of the Russian immigration can be formulated on the basis of Israel's experience with the mass immigrations of the 1950s and 1990s: "the ethnicization thesis" and the "assimilation thesis."

The ethnicization thesis is a simple extrapolation of the trends established in the 1990s. It is posited that the Russian immigrants of the 1990s will preserve their language and culture, congregate in certain neighborhoods, retain various ties with the home country, maintain Russian political parties, marry among themselves, foster a distinct identity, with a large number of non-Jewish relatives, and form a separate ethnic enclave. Indeed, Al-Haj argues that the Russian immigrants are forming a separate ethnic group in addition to Ashkenazim, Mizrahim, and Arabs.⁴⁵ Moreover, Remennick analyzes the Russian immigrants as a transnational community in the making.⁴⁶

The ethnicization thesis bases its prediction not only on the Russian immigrants' desire to remain separate culturally and socially but also on the apparent weaknesses of Israeli society. Israel has lost its will and ability to assimilate the new immigrants. It is too sectorial and disunited to wish and be able to fully incorporate the newcomers. Like other Western countries, it is succumbing to the winds and pressures of multiculturalism and is drifting away from its classical Zionist goals of a unilingual and unicultural Jewish society. The consolidation of a separate and distinct Russian community will make Israel increasingly multilingual, multicultural, civic, non-Jewish, and non-Zionist.⁴⁷

The assimilation thesis assumes, by contrast, that the fate of the Russian immigrants of the 1990s will be both similar to and different from the fate of the immigrants of the 1950s. The thesis focuses on the children of the Jewish and Ashkenazi immigrants who are born or raised in Israel, allowing for the possibility that the adult immigrants will be a transitional generation that keeps apart from the mainstream. The new generation will be Israelized while preserving Russian as a second language and Russian culture as a subculture. Due to their high socioeconomic achievements and cultural resemblance to the Ashkenazi old-timers, the second- and later-generation Russian Jews will be absorbed into the Ashkenazi ethnic group rather than creating a separate sector in Israel. They will not crystallize as a transnational community and will not be part of the Russian diaspora like the Russian minorities in the post-Soviet independent states across the Russian border.

The prediction of Russian assimilation is based on several developments that prevailed in the 1990s. First, the Russian immigrants and their elite and leaders lacked a collective goal of creating a separate community. Their political parties and media did not demand that Russian should become an official language or a language of instruction in schools. Second, Russian immigrants will assimilate because of lack of institutional arrangements to preserve their separate heritage. A pivotal necessary condition for the intergenerational preservation of a separate language and culture is a separate compulsory education system in the Russian language. The Russian immigrants do not make such a demand, and if they ever do, it will certainly be denied. Third, the Russian immigrants will enter the middle class as a group thanks to their high aspirations and high human capital and the opportunities available to them. Mass entry into the middle class will require advanced assimilation, and Russian immigrants will be willing to pay the price as shown by their past record of enormous assimilation in the Soviet Union. And fourth, the old-timers are

prepared to assimilate the Russian immigrants and their offspring and even to marry them. It is expected that Russian Israelis will merge into the Ashkenazi group to which they will draw increasingly close in culture and socioeconomic status. Their absorption into the Ashkenazi group will shift them to the political center and left and will make them more tolerant of Arabs inside and outside Israel.⁴⁸

The assimilation of the Russian immigrants, like the Mizrahi immigrants of the 1950s, will leave a significant imprint on Israeli society. A Russian group with a Russian subculture will be marked off within Ashkenazim. The Russian subculture may be as distinct as the Mizrahi subculture. Russian amalgamation with other Ashkenazim will consolidate Mizrahim as a non-dominant ethnic group.

One important impact of Russian Jewry, both in and outside Israel, is the potential reshaping of Jewish identity. Studies have shown that Russian Jews both in Israel and in the former Soviet Union view Jews in terms of national self-definition rather than as co-ethnics and co-religionists.⁴⁹ This perspective may contribute to the separation between ethnicity, nationality and religion among Jews in Israel.

I view both theses about the Russian mass immigration as valid, but for different generations. While the ethnicization thesis is more valid for the adult foreign-born generation and for the non-Jewish immigrants among them, the assimilation thesis is more plausible for the Israeli-born and Israeli-raised generation. The future has in store considerable assimilation for Russian Israelis.

Comparison

Table 1 presents a detailed comparison between the two waves of mass immigration to Israel. It shows that in every respect the Russian mass immigration of the 1990s had decisive advantages over the Mizrahi mass immigration of the 1950s. The “initial setting” was much more favorable to the Russian than to the Mizrahi immigrants. The Russian immigrants arrived to a state and a society that were much more democratic, tolerant, and affluent. Contrary to the repressive 1950s, Israel of the 1990s did not define the immigrants as a threat, did not attempt to crush their culture, and could not harness them to tackle its urgent needs.⁵⁰ The Russian immigrants were also much better equipped to succeed than the Mizrahi immigrants. They had much better education, fewer children, and more connections with Israeli old-timers.

The Russian immigrants also had advantages over the Mizrahi immigrants with respect to the “encounter dynamics.” In the 1990s Israel had already switched to a policy of “direct absorption” that provided the newcomer with a generous “absorption basket,” while in the 1950s the absorption policy was bureaucratic and authoritative, furnishing the immigrants with modest means and services and making them dependent on the authorities for employment, housing, health, and other facilities. The highly educated and skilled Russian immigrants could compete openly and successfully in the labor market while Mizrahim faced ethnic discrimination and suffered from their lower education and skills when competing with the Ashkenazi veterans and newcomers in the 1950s. Russian immigrants encountered weaker pressures to assimilate and their Israelization was slower than that of Mizrahim. Their high mobilization, evident in numerous political, cultural, and social organizations, was tolerated by the old-timers and was instrumental in their social mobility. On the other hand, Mizrahi mobilization was blocked by the powerful establishment of the time.

There are both similarities and differences in the “long-term outcomes” of the two waves of mass immigration. Both waves strengthened Israel’s demographic base, the

Table 1. Comparison between the Mizrahi mass immigration of the 1950s and the Russian mass immigration of the 1990s.

	Mizrahi Immigrants (1948–1964)	Russian Immigrants (1989–2005)
1. Initial Setting		
1.1 State and Society		
State features	Centralized, semi-democratic	Partly centralized, highly democratic
Economy	Poor, rapidly developing, and expanding	Highly developed, belongs to high-income countries, globalizing, undergoing both economic growth and recession
State needs	Urgent	Not urgent
Societal ethos	Hegemonic, collectivistic, creating and rewarding the “pioneering Sabra type”	Partly hegemonic, increasingly individualistic, tolerant of several Israeli types
1.2 Old-timers		
Ethnic origin	Overwhelmingly Ashkenazi	Both Ashkenazi and Mizrahi
Control of the state, society and economy	In the hands of Ashkenazim	No group is in overall control
Expected role of the immigrants	A tool for the implementation of the Zionist project	A tool for strengthening Jewish society
Perceived threats	Demographic swamping, cultural erosion, breakdown of democracy	Ethnic enclave
Incorporation mode	Assimilationist and repressive	Assimilation-oriented but tolerant of diversity
1.3. Immigrants		
Numerical size	648,160 (of a total of 1,213,555) immigrants from Asia-Africa arrived during 1948–64 as compared with 630,000 Jews in Palestine on 14 May 1948 (a ratio of 1 to 1)	About 1,000,000 immigrants from FSU arrived during 1989–2005 as compared with 3,717,100 Jews in Israel in 1989 (a ratio of 1 to 4)
De facto status	De facto refugees	De facto refugees
Proportion of non-Jews	None	A fourth to a third
Jewish identity	Very strong	Very weak
Cultural distance	Large	Small
Family size	Large	Small
Material capital	Nil	Nil
Human capital	Low	High
Social Networks	Almost none	Extensive
Collective goal	Integration	Integration

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Table 1 – *continued*

	Mizrahi Immigrants (1948–1964)	Russian Immigrants (1989–2005)
2. Encounter Dynamics		
Immigrant legal status	Citizens upon arrival	Citizens upon arrival
Immigrant absorption policies	Bureaucratic immigrant absorption, poor absorption basket, limited welfare services, use of immigrants to meet state's urgent needs, institutional ethnic discrimination	Direct immigrant absorption, rich absorption basket, broad welfare services, no use of immigrants to meet state's urgent needs, no institutional ethnic discrimination
Economic and social policies	Full employment, low wages, the state supported the veteran-Ashkenazi upper and middle classes	Economic liberalization, globalization
Labor market competition	Ethnic discrimination	Free competition
Ethnic stratification	Streamlining of immigrants to lower strata	Immigrants enter different strata
Ethnic acculturation	Breakdown of culture of origin and imposition of Israeli culture	Retention of culture of origin and slow acquisition of Israeli culture
Ethnic mixing	Mizrahim from different countries of origin mix with each other	Limited mixing
Level of ethnic mobilization	Low	High
3. Long-Term Outcomes		
Ethnic divide	After 50 Years Stable real ethnic divide between Mizrahim and Ashkenazim characterized by ethnic stratification, subcultural diversity, medium-sized separation (or assimilation), some degree of ethnocentrism, bitter collective memory, and related differences	Forecast for the Next 25 Years: "Assimilation Thesis" Russians will neither become a separate ethnic group nor a transnational community; will enter the middle class en masse, assimilate culturally and socially into Ashkenazim, retain Russian language and culture as a second language and as a subculture
Comparison of the ethnic divide with other cleavages	No deep cleavage (less than the Arab–Jewish and religious–secular cleavages) but overlaps and reinforces the political and class divisions	Russian–non-Russian divide will not be deep (less than the Arab–Jewish and religious–secular cleavages)
National resilience	Mizrahim reinforced national resilience by strengthening Jewish demography, settlement, economy and military	Russians will reinforce national resilience by strengthening Jewish demography, settlement, economy and military
Economy	Most Mizrahim are adversely affected by economic liberalization and globalization but do not fight against them	Russians will facilitate economic globalization

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Table 1 – *continued*

	Mizrahi Immigrants (1948–1964)	Russian Immigrants (1989–2005)
Culture	Mizrahim absorbed Israeli culture and have made only minor contributions to it; they are not the main group pushing Israel toward multiculturalism	Russians will absorb Israeli culture and make only minor contributions to it; they will not be the main group pushing Israel toward multiculturalism
Religion	Mizrahim strengthened Orthodox Jewry and the centrality of religion in public life	Russians will weaken Orthodox Jewry and religion in public life and will broaden the meaning of who is a Jew
Politics	Mizrahim have made the right-wing political camp a ruling force in Israeli politics and have become the backbone of right-wing politics	Russians will shift to the center and Labor bloc as their assimilation into the Ashkenazi group advances
Attitudes toward Arabs	Anti-Arab	Russians will become less anti-Arab as their assimilation into the Ashkenazi group advances
Peace process	Mizrahim played a role in inhibiting the peace process	Russians will back the peace process as their assimilation into the Ashkenazi group advances

settlement of the land by Jews, and the economy and the military and both diversified its population and culture. If the assimilation thesis proves to be true in the long run and the Russian immigrants enter the middle class and merge into the dominant Ashkenazi group, then they will do much better than the majority of Mizrahim who have stuck in the lower echelons of society since their arrival.

Conclusion

The two waves of mass immigration in the 1950s and 1990s contributed considerably to Israel by increasing its Jewish majority, strengthening its military, expanding its economy and settling the land. They made Israel a more viable state in the eyes of its citizens, belligerent neighbors and the international community. The influx of immigrants diversified the population in ethnicity and culture and made the task of assimilation more difficult.

Beyond these similarities, the differences between the two waves of immigration are striking. It is the contrast between stories of failure versus stories of success. The Mizrahi immigrants of the 1950s came with poor resources to a state that was fledgling, poor, and small. Because they differed greatly in culture and ethnic background from the old-timers, they were perceived as a major threat and forced to abandon their heritage and to adopt the new Israeli culture. They became Israelis in culture and identity and Zionist in ideology and entered the lower strata of society, displacing veteran Ashkenazim upwards. On the other hand, the Russian mass immigration of the 1990s came with high human capital to an established and relatively affluent country. They were not seen as a menace and were allowed to keep their language and culture during their initial encounter with the old-timers. The Russian immigrants created separate communal institutions and entered all social strata.

There are two conflicting theses about the future of Russian immigrants in Israel: the ethnicization thesis that predicts that they will form a new ethnic group in Israeli society versus the assimilation thesis that forecasts their assimilation into the Ashkenazim. It is likely that if they join the middle class en masse, they will merge into the dominant Ashkenazi group.

The importance of the class factor in immigrant absorption is evident. The streamlining of Mizrahi immigrants to the lower rungs of society and the persistent inequality between them and the Ashkenazi old-timers is the crux of the ethnic problem in Israel. Mizrahi Jews would probably condone the loss of their culture and their degradation during the 1950s if compensated by high rates of social mobility. The Russian immigrants' assimilation, projected for the next generation, is predicated on their massive penetration into the middle and upper classes. But if they fail to do so, they will probably opt to consolidate their evolving ethnic enclave.

Jewish immigration to Israel is similar in certain respects to European immigrants to the United States. The WASPs are the charter and founding group that formed American society, the American language, culture, legal system, national identity, and way of life. For more than two centuries they readily assimilated Protestant immigrants from western and central Europe and made headway with the integration of Irish and German Catholics who started to arrive in the 1820s, but the assimilation of the immigrants from southern and eastern Europe who began to arrive in the 1880s was slower and more difficult.⁵¹ Being neither Anglo-Saxon nor Protestant, these Polish, Italian, Jewish, and other immigrants lacked a Western background, and possessed low human capital. They were perceived as a national threat. A century later the descendants of these immigrants are still identified as "white ethnics," but their ethnicity is more symbolic than real.⁵² The Jews,

being the most successful white ethnic group, have made their way up to the higher strata and even to the elite, given up their non-English languages, acquired the American culture, intermarried with the WASPs, and adopted a hyphenated Jewish-American identity. With higher rates of intergenerational social mobility, Jewish ethnicity in the United States has become thin, diluted, optional, and not costly to the individual.

The Jewish mass immigrations to Israel resemble the mass immigration to the United States from southern and eastern Europe, and their Israeli descendants bear a great resemblance to the American white ethnics. The similar processes of Israelization and Americanization drew immigrants and old-timers together in language, culture, institutions, and even kinship. The threats to the established culture and dominance attributed to the immigrants by the old stock were successfully forestalled. Yet assimilation resulted in the shift in the position of the charter group from hegemony to dominance.⁵³ Furthermore, even the striking differences between Mizrahi and Russian immigrants to Israel are reminiscent of the differences between white ethnic groups in the United States. Mizrahim bring to mind the less successful Italian Americans while Israeli Russians have the potential of duplicating the great success of American Jews.

Finally, it is very tempting to infer from the past record of Jewish immigrants to the United States what is in store for Russian immigrants to Israel. Jewish Americans made it thanks to the special combination of white stock, artisan and trading skills, strong family ties, education as a supreme value, achievement motive, and arrival to a booming economy and a Judeo-Christian culture. Similarly, Russian immigrants have been making it in Israel thanks to their "fit" with Israel as a Jewish- and Ashkenazi-dominated, Western-oriented, secular, and post-industrial society. They possess the means and prospects for joining the dominant group as Jewish Americans have successfully done over several generations.

Notes

1. Berry, "Immigration, Acculturation, and Adaptation"; Marger, *Race and Ethnic Relations*; van den Berghe, *The Ethnic Phenomenon*.
2. Kymlicka, *Multicultural Citizenship*.
3. Faist, "Transnationalization"; Pedraza, "Assimilation or Transnationalism?"
4. Parekh, *Rethinking Multiculturalism*.
5. Joppke, *Immigration and the Nation-State*.
6. Brubaker, "The Return of Assimilation?"
7. Kymlicka, *States, Nations and Cultures*.
8. The assimilation thesis does not seem to hold true for Ethiopian immigrants to Israel. They suffer from multiple handicaps, including their black skin, doubtful Jewishness, scant material and human capital, enormous cultural distance, and a high rate of broken families. Veteran Israelis tend to exclude Ethiopian immigrants despite the goodwill of the authorities. See Shabtai, "Lihiyot im zehut me'uyemet"; Kaplan and Salamon, "Ethiopian Jews in Israel"; Ben-Eliezer, "Becoming a Black Jew."
9. For a detailed account of immigration and immigrant absorption in Israel from 1948 to the end of the 1990s, see Hacohen, "Aliyah ve-klitah". There are various theoretical approaches to immigrant absorption and to Jewish ethnicity in Israel. See, among others, Smooha, "Three Approaches"; Swirski, *Israel*; Ben-Rafael, *The Emergence of Ethnicity*; Shual and Leshem, "The Sociology of Migration"; Hever, Shenhav, and Mutzafi-Haller, *Mizrahim be-Yisrael*; Yonah, *Bi-zkhut ha-hevdel*.
10. Central Bureau of Statistics, *Statistical Abstract of Israel 2007*, Tables 4.2 and 4.4.
11. Lewis, *The Jews of Islam*.
12. Smooha, *Israel*.
13. Almog, *The Sabra*.
14. Halper, "Afro-Asian Jews in Jerusalem."
15. Lissak, "Ha-be'ayah ha-adatit."

16. Shafir, "The Meeting of Eastern Europe and Yemen."
17. For a detailed account of one of the most telling examples of the exclusionary and differential treatment of Yemenites during the Yishuv period, see Nini, *He-hayit o halamti halom?*
18. Behar ("Palestine, Arabized Jews") conceives of Middle Eastern Jews as "a border-zone community" located between Ashkenazim and Arabs who hence could have possibly been included either in Arab nationalism and the Arab nation or in Zionism and the Jewish nation. "The Jewish and Arab national movements sometimes included Arabized-Jews in – and at other times excluded them from – their ranks. From the late 1930s, actions by Zionist and Arab forces vis-à-vis Arabized-Jews converged, producing their dispersal" (581), namely, inclusion in the Jewish-Zionist collectivity and emigration to Israel.
19. Friedlander and Goldscheider, *The Population of Israel*.
20. Shohat, "Rupture and Return"; Shenhav, *The Arab Jews*; Khazzoom, "The Great Chain of Orientalism."
21. Cohen, "Ethnicity and Legitimation of Contemporary Israel."
22. Lissak, *Ha-aliyah ha-gedolah*.
23. Lissak, "Dimuyei olim."
24. Rosenfeld and Carmi, "Nikus emtza'im tziburim."
25. Bernstein and Swirski, "The Rapid Economic Development of Israel."
26. Rosental-Marmorstein in *Ha-nadon: Ashkenazim*, discusses critically, from an Ashkenazi viewpoint, the Mizrahi narrative and criticisms.
27. Weiss, *Wadi Salib*.
28. For more details on the immigration during Israel's first decade, see Hacoheh, *Olim Bi-se'arah*; Lissak *Ha-aliyah ha-gedolah*; Tzur, *Kehilah kru'ah*.
29. For a detailed account of the Mizrahi-Ashkenazi division in Israel in the 2000s, see Smooha, "Jewish Ethnicity in Israel."
30. For discussion of marriage patterns, see Schmelz, DellaPergola, and Avner, *Ethnic Differences*; Shavit and Stier, "Adatiyut ve-haskalah."
31. There are persistent intergenerational ethnic disparities in educational achievements. For instance, the proportion of Jews aged 18–25 with matriculation diplomas in 1995 varied considerably according to ethnic origin and generation. At the top were second-generation Ashkenazi youths with a rate of 80%, while at the bottom were foreign-born Mizrahi youths with a rate of 46%. Ashkenazi Sabras had on the average a lead of 20% over Mizrahi Sabras. For more details, see Dahan et al., "Ha'im ha-pa'arim ha-hinukhiim hitzamtzemu?" For other studies that demonstrate the persistence of the ethnic gaps, see Cohen and Haberfeld, "Second-Generation Jewish Immigrants"; Cohen, Haberfeld and Kristal, "Ethnic Gaps"; Bernstein, "Ha-aliyah ha-hamonit." For an opposite view that emphasizes the closure of ethnic gaps and the success of the melting pot, see Ya'ar, "Continuity and Change."
32. Peled, *Shas*.
33. For a detailed empirical examination of this evaluation, see Smooha, "Ethnicity as a Factor."
34. Levy, *Israel's Materialist Militarism*.
35. In her book *Shifting Ethnic Boundaries and Inequality in Israel*, Khazzoom, drawing on postcolonial theoretical perspective, accounts for the maltreatment of Mizrahim in the 1950s in terms of the Ashkenazi self-identity as Western and the self-defense of Western Israel against its Orientalization by Mizrahi immigrants. Iraqi immigrants were better treated because they were more Westernized and could convince the Ashkenazi old-timers of being Western. Ethnic relations improved after the collapse of the Arab culture of Mizrahi immigrants and the state's neutralization of the Orientalism threat, which was labeled "Levantinization" at that time.
36. For various accounts of the Russian mass immigration to Israel, see Sicron and Leshem, *Dyukan shel aliyah*; Lissak and Leshem, *Me-Rusiyah le-Yisrael*; Leshem and Sicron, "The Soviet Immigrant Community"; Kimmerling, "Ha-yisraelim ha-hadashim"; Remennick, *Russian Jews on Three Continents*; Ben-Rafael et al., *Building a Diaspora*; and Gomel, *Atem ve-anahnu*.
37. For scrutiny of Israel's semi-Western nature, see Smooha, "Is Israel Western?"
38. Kimmerling, *The Invention and Decline of Israeliness*.
39. Shafir and Peled, *Being Israeli*.
40. For a review of the protest of some radical Arabs and Mizrahim against the Russian immigration and its suppression in order to preserve Israel's Zionist, hegemonic "ethno-republican ethos" and "Ashkenazi-Western supremacy," see Yonah, *Bi-zkhut ha-hevdel*, 130–47.

41. Lissak and Leshem, *Me-Rusiyah le-Yisrael*.
42. The achievements of these Asian immigrants in Israel are appreciably lower than the performance of Ashkenazi immigrants from the same independent states. See Haberfeld, Semyonov, and Cohen, "Ethnicity and Labour Market Performance."
43. The rate of downward mobility of the Russian immigrants to Israel was greater than that of Russian immigrants to Canada because Jewish immigration to Israel is not selective whereas in Canada immigrants are selected according to the needs of the labor market. See Lewin-Epstein et al., "Institutional Structure and Immigration Integration."
44. For an analysis of the Russian immigrant vote to the Knesset, see Goldstein and Gitelman, "From 'Russians' to Israelis?"; Philippov, "1990s Immigrants."
45. Al-Haj, *Immigration and Ethnic Formation*.
46. Remennick, "Transnational Community in the Making." See also Elias and Zeltser-Shorer, "Russian Diaspora On-Line."
47. Lissak expresses these fears in "Ha-olim me-Hever ha-Amim."
48. During the initial period up to 1998 the Russian immigrants and their elite stressed cultural retention and social separation from old-timers (Al-Haj and Leshem, *Immigrants*; Al-Haj, "Ethnic Mobilization"), but toward the end of the 1990s they shifted toward integration (Shumsky, "Ethnicity and Citizenship"). The shift was evident in the increased acquisition of the Hebrew language among the young and middle-aged immigrants (Remennick, "Language Acquisition"), in the growing identification with Israel as a Jewish state, in their Orientalist and Islamophobic discourse and anti-Arab and anti-Mizrahi attitudes (Shumsky, "Post-Zionist Orientalism?"), and in the decline of separate Russian parties.
49. Gitelman, "The Decline of the Diaspora Jewish Nation"; Chervyakov, Gitelman, and Shapiro, "Religion and Ethnicity"; Licitsa and Peres, "Olei Hever ha-Amim be-Yisrael."
50. Prime Minister Shamir planned to prolong peace negotiations for ten years to give time for a massive Jewish settlement, mostly by Russian immigrants, of the West Bank and Gaza in order to make partition of the Land of Israel/Palestine impossible. This goal could not be realized because the government did not control the new immigrants and because of the United States' objections.
51. Beginning in the 1820s, the WASPs had to cope with a large wave of Catholic Irish and Catholic German immigrants. The hostility toward them was much less than that toward the immigrants from southern-eastern Europe of the turn of the century because the former were Anglo-Saxon but not Protestant, whereas the latter were neither Anglo-Saxon nor Protestant.
52. Gans, "Symbolic Ethnicity."
53. While there is agreement that Ashkenazim have lost exclusivity and power, scholars are divided on the issue of Ashkenazi hegemony. Most scholars of both mainstream and critical schools of thought hold that Ashkenazim lost hegemony. Kimmerling, in *Ketz shilton ha-ahusalim* and *The Invention and Decline of Israeliness*, best conveyed this view. On the other hand, Yonah, in *Bi-zkhut ha-hevdel*, maintains that Ashkenazi hegemony, while weakening and changing its forms, has remained in effect.

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