

4. MIGRATION FROM ISRAEL

A. Main processes

As in any country, emigration is a process symmetrical in some respects to immigration, but in Israel *yeridah* has been usually discussed from an ideologically charged perspective rather than a more matter-of-fact one. According to the United Nations world review of national population policies, Israel's government has consistently perceived immigration levels as too low, and emigration levels as too high (United Nations, 2009). The growing number of Israelis who live abroad for shorter or longer periods plays more than a negligible role in the overall demographic balance and illustrates important junctures of the Israeli social system and its interactions with world Jewry (Gold, 2002).

It is very hard to provide exact estimates of the yearly number of emigrants from Israel and of the total number of Israelis abroad because emigration is not recorded as such at Israel border stations. The emigration estimates in Figure 9 above are mostly based on comparing the numbers of permanent residents entering and leaving Israel. Indirect data exist based on people who left the country and did not return after prolonged periods of stay abroad, but some of these may have died abroad. Some emigrants may re-enter Israel after a change of citizenship. The monitoring of their movements is thus interrupted. On the other hand, some Israelis who reside abroad and frequently travel to Israel may be regarded as living in Israel according to border police data while in reality they spend most of their lives abroad.

Even more complex is the question: Who is an Israeli abroad, since the whole pool is composed of four different groups:

- Persons born in another country who after a stay in Israel returned to that same country;
- Persons born in another country who after a stay in Israel moved to a third country;
- Persons born in Israel; and
- Foreign-born children of Israelis of all the categories above.

Clearly, the designation of Israeli emigrant applies in increasing order to the first three types, the first one being typically an immigrant who did not integrate. But, to be sure,

the emphasis has been gradually shifting from the first and second to the third (and fourth) type, which represents the more significant and pressing subject of discourse about emigration.

Over time the number of Israelis leaving the country has fluctuated constantly but within a much narrower range than the massive changes in the volume of immigration (see Figure 9 above). While population size steadily increased, the average number of emigrants remained remarkably stable, thus implying a decreasing rate of emigrants per 1000 inhabitants. The latter has been estimated in recent years at 3-4 per 1000, which is considered by many as too high. It is important to note, however, that very similar levels of mobility characterizes the frequency of migration from a country like Switzerland to Israel, which is generally deemed to be quite low. Therefore the definition and perception of *high* and *low* is clearly more related to normative perceptions than to objective criteria.

The total pool of former Israeli residents abroad – referring to the three first types already mentioned – can be estimated at some 5-600,000, while every year a continuous flow adds new people, and several thousands return to Israel. These estimates are far lower than numbers often heard in public discourse. Taking into account children born abroad, a total estimate of Israelis abroad can tentatively be put at up to 15% of the total Jewish population living in Israel. In addition, significant numbers may be drifting abroad for shorter or longer periods that may include temporary or even permanent work activities.

The largest group of expats is in the United States where studies have estimated the number of Israelis at over 200,000 (Cohen and Haberfeld, 1997; Rebhun and Lev Ari, 2010). Other attractive countries for Israelis include Canada, Australia and to a lesser extent those of Western Europe. The development of globalization and the creation of new markets for the Israeli economy generate new work opportunities for Israelis in these places. Several African countries used to have small and stable communities of Israelis. It can be expected that if the current trends continue, the number of Israelis temporarily or permanently living in countries like China, Korea and Japan will increase. In the hypothetical and for now remote scenario of normalization between Israel and the Arab countries, the number of Israelis residing in those countries would be bound to increase significantly.

Emigration from Israel mainly responds to five determinants:

- Response to periodical changes in the main economic indicators such as employment levels, price stability and foreign investment – as in any other developed society;
- Response to the closeness of correspondence between the immigrants' characteristics and the available pool of opportunities mainly in the socioeconomic and employment sphere;
- Return or circular migration of former immigrants who did not sufficiently integrate in the country or had, beforehand, decided to move to Israel for a short stay – as in any other society affected by large-scale immigration;
- Availability of employment opportunities abroad as against occupational bottlenecks in Israel;
- Response to events affecting security in the country; and
- Expression of the level of cultural and/or emotional identification with the State of Israel and its society.

Overall, Israel's retention rate of new immigrants has been high. At the end of 2009 there lived in Israel 1,141,290 residents who had immigrated since 1989, as against a total number of 1,248,712 new immigrants during the same period (Israel CBS, 2009). This means that the total of those who re-migrated or died was 107,422, or 8.6% of total immigrants. This is a remarkably low rate of attrition considering that the percentages of ethnic Germans who immigrated to Germany between 1954 and 1999 and left was above 60% (Münz, 2002).

Over time, the focus of the debate about Israeli emigration has shifted from the mere quantitative dimension to a more attentive consideration of the qualitative implications of the loss of human capital inherent in emigration. While perhaps in the past consideration of mere numbers mainly reflected the concern with the size of labor pool in a relatively simpler economy burdened with security problems, today in a much more sophisticated socioeconomic context the concern turns to the economic costs of highly skilled human resources leaving Israel.

One of the most significant aspects is the educational composition of the emigrants, with a growing emphasis on well-trained people. In the U.S., compared with immigrants from other countries, Israelis hold the highest ratio of college and university teachers

per 1000 population in the country of origin. Thus, emigration from Israel is more significant for its brain-drain character than for its absolute quantitative size. Partly mitigating this problematic finding is that it has also been found that many of the more gifted tend to return to Israel after a period of stay abroad (Cohen, 2009).

When one considers the high level of immigration to Israel, the growing integration of Israeli society in a global migration system, the smallness of the Israeli market and its inability to provide jobs to all the highly skilled manpower trained in the country or imported through immigration, emigration from Israel does not reach the level of social pathology but it looks quite normally commensurate with its environment. Nonetheless it is the value-oriented aspects of emigration from a country whose founding ethos was immigration and the absorption of immigrants that primarily raise the relevance of the issue in public and policy discourse.

One further aspect quite peculiar to Israel related to temporary mobility more than to emigration proper is the widespread tendency among Israeli youth – especially before or after military service – to travel abroad, sometimes for extended periods. Considering that these are mostly Israel-born, and allowing for a total percent of Israelis born abroad still close to 40% of the total Jewish population, Israel has one of the highest proportions in the world of people who have ever been abroad. The feature of frequent traveling abroad may be a very functional psychological mechanism to compensate for stress, among other things related to prolonged military service. It also may serve to broaden perspectives, which is important in a country tending towards localism and provincialism. What calls for attention, however, is the relatively frequent number of troubling incidents involving young Israelis abroad, often marked by unreasonable risk-taking or inadequate appreciation of the odds of negative outcomes in various situations. Even though the vast majority of these travelers safely return, this phenomenon points to some evident or latent measure of crisis, or lack of satisfaction – or even responsibility– that calls for thought.

In the past, the public attitude in Israel toward Israelis abroad was one of impatience and condemnation, while epithets such as *yored* (descending) or *nemusha* (weakling) were commonly used. Today, the socioeconomic and ideological-cultural situation has drastically changed and the growing globalization of the economy imposes more frequent interactions between Israel and abroad. Contrary to many perceptions, research data on Israelis in the U.S. show a high level of attachment to Israel, continuing involvement with Israeli politics, a high level of attachment to the Jewish People,

robustly unique residential patterns, a fairly high level of integration within the local Jewish community system, even if from the point of view of religious expression quite a high proportion do not identify with any of the major American Jewish religious denominations (NJPS, 2001; Kim and White, 2005; Lev Ari, 2008; Rebhun and Lev Ari, 2010).

B. Intervening mechanisms

As already noted with immigration, processes shaping emigration operate both at the macro- and the micro-social levels. The latter are easier to envisage and more likely to produce immediate returns, but the effects of the former tend to be more massive and long-lasting. The more obvious mechanisms that may reduce emigration from Israel operate through the general level of economic development, job opportunities, stability, security and satisfaction with Israeli society.

However, more specific mechanisms relate to the peculiar circumstances of emigration and characteristics of Israelis abroad, namely:

- comparatively high levels of education;
- widespread immigration background, i.e. being foreign-born or a child of immigrants;
- persistence of family links and continuing emotional attachment to Israel; and
- significant social networks linking Israelis abroad among themselves.

Higher education and family networks abroad are an incentive for more frequent emigration from Israel. Family and social networks in Israel may provide incentives to return. The further aspect to be considered is the dynamics of acculturation and absorption of Israeli emigrants in the new countries of residence, both in the general societal framework and within the Jewish community framework. These features provide clues for possible policies aimed at emigrants from Israel.

C. Main policy options and directions: Israel

1. In light of the powerful correlation that exists between emigration from Israel and the economic – especially employment – situation, in addition to factors influencing satisfaction of living in Israel, a most obvious but crucial general goal for thought is that stable and attractive conditions should be created in Israeli society for full employment and fruition of the potentialities of professional training and skills.

2. In particular, higher priority should be given to special investments in Israel in areas of the economy, research and development capable of absorbing the supply of well-educated and sophisticated manpower being created through the Israeli higher education system and through immigration.
3. Acknowledging that a growing proportion of Israeli emigrants are individuals born and socialized in the country, efforts should be invested in improving the sense of cultural and national belonging of the younger generation to their home country. Special educational initiatives should be developed to strengthen among Israel's younger generation the search for meaning in the local context.
4. Efforts should be invested in reducing the re-migration of new immigrants by better understanding and facilitating their process of adaptation in Israel.
5. Tools should be developed and budgets allocated that may encourage Israelis abroad holding cutting edge occupational skills to return to Israel.
6. An entirely new strategy is needed to face the growing pool of Israeli citizens who live abroad. Such programs need to be coordinated between appropriate agencies in Israel and Jewish community organizations worldwide.
 - The cultural and economic links of Israelis abroad with Israel should be enhanced by establishing more points of encounter and appropriate activities there. This may help Israelis to maintain stronger contacts with other Israelis and with the local Jewish community.
 - Relations of children of Israelis with the home country and with Jewish culture should be strengthened.
 - Ways and means should be developed to help Israelis wishing to return to Israel permanently to do so. At least part time residence in Israel should be encouraged.
 - Links with Israel among Israelis who live abroad should be facilitated through appropriate incentives in income taxation and similar areas, and by providing appropriate educational and military training frameworks.
 - The resources available to Israeli representative agencies to keep in touch with Israelis abroad should be increased.
7. Following the example of other countries, the relationship of the home country and its Diaspora should be reexamined and given an appropriate institutional

framework.

- Following the example of tens of other countries, including most of the major Western democracies, it is worth examining the desirability of granting voting rights to Israelis abroad, provided they have maintained their Israeli citizenship.
- Among methods adopted by other countries where citizens resident abroad have suffrage rights: (1) such voters may be counted in the total of votes to the national parliament, countrywide and in each voting circumscription in the home country, as in the U.S. and France; (2) such voters may elect in the national parliament a number of representatives of the Diaspora, proportionally smaller than their actual numerical weight, as in Italy; (3) such voters may elect a special consultative body of all national citizens who are residing abroad, as in France, Italy, and Hungary.

D. Main policy options and directions: Diaspora

1. Support incorporation into, rather than the alienation of Israelis from Jewish communities abroad. Encourage Israelis to be in contact with both their local Jewish communities and with Israel.
2. Provide help in the establishment of Jewish educational facilities for Israelis and in the admission of Israeli students within the fabric of local Jewish schools.
3. Facilitate the organization of events and frameworks where local Jews and Israelis can interact.