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CIRCULAR MIGRATION IN ISRAEL

Haim Yacobi

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CARIM
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for Applied Research on International Migration

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CARIM

The Euro-Mediterranean Consortium for Applied Research on International Migration (CARIM) was created in February 2004 and has been financed by the European Commission. Until January 2007, it referred to part C - “*cooperation related to the social integration of immigrants issue, migration and free circulation of persons*” of the MEDA programme, i.e. the main financial instrument of the European Union to establish the Euro-Mediterranean Partnership. Since February 2007, CARIM has been funded as part of the AENEAS programme for technical and financial assistance to third countries in the areas of migration and asylum. The latter programme establishes a link between the external objectives of the European Union’s migration policy and its development policy. AENEAS aims at providing third countries with the assistance necessary to achieve, at different levels, a better management of migrant flows.

Within this framework, CARIM aims, in an academic perspective, to observe, analyse, and predict migration in the North African and the Eastern Mediterranean Region (hereafter Region).

CARIM is composed of a coordinating unit established at the Robert Schuman Centre for Advanced Studies (RSCAS) of the European University Institute (EUI, Florence), and a network of scientific correspondents based in the 12 countries observed by CARIM: Algeria, Egypt, Israel, Jordan, Lebanon, Morocco, Palestine, Syria, Tunisia, Turkey and, since February 2007, also Libya and Mauritania. All are studied as origin, transit and immigration countries. External experts from the European Union and countries of the Region also contribute to CARIM activities.

The CARIM carries out the following activities:

- Mediterranean migration database;
- Research and publications;
- Meetings of academics;
- Meetings between experts and policy makers;
- Early warning system.

The activities of CARIM cover three aspects of international migration in the Region: economic and demographic, legal, and socio-political.

Results of the above activities are made available for public consultation through the website of the project: www.carim.org

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Abstract

This paper examines patterns of circular migration in Israel and the controversial socio-political aspects impacting migration. It sheds light on the constraints affecting circularity in the Israeli-Palestinian case, and shows how the debate on labour and circular migration in the public sphere is directly related to the debate on national identity in Israel. In the conclusion, the paper explores ways of creating a propitious setting for circular migration in Israel.

Résumé

Le papier examine différents types de migration circulaire en Israël, et met en perspective les enjeux socio-politiques qui influencent ces mouvements migratoires. L'auteur tient compte également des contraintes qui entravent la circularité dans le cas israélo-palestinien et montre notamment comment le débat sur la migration circulaire et sur la migration de la main-d'œuvre dans les milieux publics est directement lié au débat sur l'identité nationale en Israël. Dans la conclusion, des suggestions pour créer un environnement propice à la migration circulaire sont proposées.

A. Introduction

Following the 1967 war, the Israeli government began recruiting Palestinian workers from the West Bank and Gaza Strip to perform low-status jobs in the Israeli labor market (Semyonov and Lewin-Epstein, 1987). These workers commuted to Israel from the Occupied Territories in the morning and left at night. The number of non-citizen Palestinian workers rose dramatically over the next twenty years: from 20,600 in 1970 to 94,700 in 1986, by then comprising seven percent of the Israeli labor force. Palestinian labor power had two patterns: (a) permanent labor in the construction industry, services and alike and (b) circular labor that responded to the shortage of workers mainly in agriculture. Economically speaking, it is important to note that the salary cost to an employer of a Palestinian worker is thirty to forty percent higher than the salary cost for a foreign worker (Ellman and Laacher, 2003).

Foreign workers started arriving in Israel legally in the 1990s. Non-Jewish migrants were initially brought to Israel following a government decision in 1993¹ to seek a replacement for Palestinian workers from the Occupied Territories. This change in the employment composition illustrates the way in which geopolitics circumstances in the regional level and local level are interlinked. The entry of Palestinian workers, who were a significant part of Israeli employment, was restricted as a result of the outbreak of the first Palestinian *Intifada* in 1987.² In 1987 the number of workers admitted by the Israeli Ministry of Labor was 2,500, and it steadily increased to 9,600 in 1993, when Israel began importing non-Jewish workers. The first flow arrived from Romania (construction industry), Thailand (agriculture), and the Philippines (geriatric care, nursing, and domestic services (Schammah Gesser et al. 2000). In 1996, the total number of valid work permits was estimated at about 103,000; of the holders, 72 percent worked in the construction industry, 16 percent in agriculture, 7 percent in nursing and geriatric care, and 5 percent in light industry and the hotel and catering industry (Schammah Gesser et al. 2000).

The flow of non-Jewish working migrants to Israel continued and according to Israel National Bank data, in the year 2000 there were 113,000 'foreign workers'. In 2001, 'Kav LaOved' (an NGO that deals with workers' rights) stated that there were 138,500 authorized labor migrants and 151,000 unauthorized (www.kavlaoved.org.il). However, after a few years of the state's 'non-policy' attitude, in August 2002 the Israeli Government declared its intention to deport 50,000 foreign workers by the end of 2003. This initiative led to a comprehensive and aggressive policy of deportation, expressed in intensive media propaganda against employing unregistered migrants. Furthermore, an Immigration Authority was established through government decision no. 2327 (July 2002) (www.cbs.gov.il). It was allocated a force of 500 police officers with the aim of deporting non-registered workers. In July 2003 about 20,000 workers were deported (www.kavlaoved.org.il) and, according to the special governmental committee dealing with foreign workers in Israel, by the end of 2005 118,035 workers had left, the majority through deportation and around 40 percent voluntarily (October, 12 2004 www.kavlaoved.org.il).³

According to official numbers, at the end of 2005 there were 178,000 foreign workers in Israel; sources suggest that 98,000 workers had entered with a work permit (www.cbs.gov.il) while 60,000 are illegal workers. In 2006 the number of foreign workers in Israel rose to approximately 300,000 according to some official sources; 60 percent of these were unauthorized (Protocol of the Special Committee for Examining the Problem of Workers, July 12, 2005 in:

1 The significance of this decision stems from its ideological contradiction to the Israeli Law of Return which declares the right of every Jew (defined as a person with at least one Jewish grandparent) to settle in Israel and receive full citizenship rights (see: www.knesset.gov.il).

2 Palestinian cheap labor, which had dominated the Israeli labor market (especially in the construction industry and in agriculture), was largely prohibited from entering the state (Cohen 1999).

3 There is wide disagreement on the data between the Israeli authorities and the different NGOs that deal with workers' rights, such as Kav LaOved.

www.knesset.gov.il/protocols/data/rtf/zarim/2005-07-12.rtf). Yet according to the Israeli Central Bureau of Statistics at the end of 2006 in Israel there were some 102,000 foreign workers who had entered with Work permits, and 84,000 who had entered as tourists (A media report of the Central Bureau of Statistics, July 30 2007). The presence of non-Jewish working migrants from Africa, Latin America, Asia and Eastern Europe who came to Israel in order to seek a better economic opportunity⁴ contradicts the Israeli ethnocratic regime.⁵ The Israeli Law of Nationality, which came into force in 1952, complemented the Law of Return from 1950. The latter, based on the *jus sanguinis* principle, gives Jews --and only Jews-- everywhere the right to immigrate, while the former grants them, almost automatically, Israeli nationality.

In general the entrance of foreign workers to Israel during the 1990s was characterized by some of the features of circular migration of those workers that re-entered Israel according to the needs of the market. Yet, the geopolitical context as well as Israel's isolated situation in the Middle East does not enable the frequent entrance of workers from its neighboring countries and thus the main entrance is through its airport. This situation limits the possibility for circular working migration (in opposition to the Palestinian workers). Additionally, the growing share of non-Jewish workers points to the new challenges of globalization and migration in the Israeli case. However, I would suggest that the policy of deportation implemented in 1995 and more extensively since 2002 obstructs (but does not eliminate) the creation of a pattern of circular migration

TABLE 1: Number of foreign workers according to available data

Year	<i>No. of workers</i>
1987	2,500 (Schammah Gesser et al. 2000).
1993	9,600 (Schammah Gesser et al. 2000).
1996	103,000 (Schammah Gesser et al. 2000).
2000	113,000 (Israel National Bank data).
2001	138,500 (www.kavlaoved.org.il)
2005	178,000 (www.cbs.gov.il)
2006	186,000 (CBS, 2006)

B. Demo-Economic Perspective: Characteristics of Circular Migration

In order to examine the patterns of circular migration in Israel let us describe the profile of the workers. Assuming that most of them arrive to Israel with the idea that it is a temporary job for a limited period of time I would suggest that regardless their country of origin, most workers arrive with previous professional experience. As for their life cycle, the majority of workers have families that remain at the country of origin. According to the survey of the Ministry of Industry and Employment

⁴ The relevance of working migration is significant; as noted in a special issue of *The Economist* in 2002 (cited in Benton-Short et al. 2005) it is impossible to distinguish between the globalization of capital and the movement of people. According to the World Bank, in the year 2002 80 Billion USD was transferred by migrants to their countries of origin (some other sources report 100-200 Billion USD). Indeed, although the movement of populations has historically shaped societies, transnational migration in recent decades is significant in its scale as well as in its social and cultural consequences.

⁵ The notion of ethnocracy was developed and conceptualized by Yiftachel (2006). In the scope of this paper, I will just mention that 'ethnocracy' accounts for regimes found in contested territories, in which a dominant ethnic nation appropriates the state to further its expansionist aspirations, while keeping some features of formal democracy. Ethnocratic states are typified by high levels of oppression over indigenous and, to a lesser extent, immigrant minorities. Ethnocracy operates both on state-wide and urban scales (Yiftachel and Yacobi 2003) with clear links between the two. In such regimes, ethnicity, and not citizenship, forms the main criterion for distributing power and resources. As a result, they typically display high levels of uneven ethnic segregation and a process of polarizing ethnic politics.

(2003) only 27 percent of the workers were unemployed in the country of origin. According to this survey, 46 percent from those who have a working visa are women and 54 percent men and the average age stands on 35.2.

Moreover, a report of the Ministry of Industry and Employment (2003) outlined the profile of workers that entered Israel legally and became illegal. The average age is 33.8 years, 58.5 percent are married, the average education level is 10.4 years of schooling, 86.5 percent are Christians, 49.8 percent learned basic Hebrew and the rest have not. 20.7 percent of the workers had brought their partner to Israel, 29.9 percent of the workers had brought other family members and 38.3 percent of the workers had other friends that entered Israel. Beyond the regulations that limit the period of stay to 5 years, the Israeli Ministry of Industry and Employment report (2003) indicates that only 16.4 percent of the workers had stayed in Israel 3-4 years and 14 percent had stayed more than 4 years. The average period stands on 30.7 months.

Concerning the specific characteristics of the Israeli case it seems unlikely that the duration of workers cannot be less than 12 months, if we consider the travel expenses, the bureaucracy and the distance of Israel from most countries of origin. The data concerning the countries of origin of the workers illustrate it clearly. According to the last report of the Israeli Central Bureau of Statistics (2006) the workers in Israel arrived from Thailand: 9,000 (28 percent); Philippines: 6,400 (20 percent); FSU: 3,500 (13 percent); Romania: 2,640 (8 percent); China: 3,300 (10 percent); Nepal: 2,800 (9 percent); USA, Germany and UK: 300 (1 percent).

Beyond the interests of Israel as a host country, it is important to look at the preferences of the workers themselves. According to a report of the Ministry of Industry and Employment (2003) 24.3 percent of the workers choose Israel as a destination because there is work and 37.6 percent stated that salaries are high. The average sum of saving each month is 557 USD and the average sum of money transferred to the country of origin in 6 months is 2,454 USD. Interestingly enough, 58.7 percent reported that they have had work in their countries of origin but had low salaries. Moreover, 31.8 percent stated that they will recommend their family or friends to work in Israel in any condition while 30.1 percent will recommend on it only with a working permit and 32.2 percent will not recommend it at all (Ministry of Industry and Employment, 2003).

C. Socio-political Perspective

Generally, the presence of authorized non-Jewish workers in Israel is officially considered as a controlled phenomenon that will serve temporary needs of the labor market. According to the regulations, a working visa (B\1) is given for one year, and before its expiration, the Ministry of Interiors can renew it. The maximum period that a foreign worker can stay in Israel is 63 months (5 years and 3 months), yet this period can be extended according to the circumstances (<http://aisrael.org/Index.asp>).

This policy enables authorized workers to extend their stay and does not encourage circular migration. The coordination of circular migrants must be done with the cooperation of both their countries of origin and the host country. Furthermore, such recruitment must be linked to specific activities, such as agriculture industry that works according to specific seasons, and can estimate the needed labor power. Yet, in the public sphere the discussion on working migration in Israel is attached to issues of national identity and social norms that reflect the ethnocentric nature of its politics as noted by Elazar (www.jcpa.org/dje/articles2/foreignwork.htm 2006):

“Soon foreign workers began to bring their own problems with them. As yet, these are relatively modest. Thai workers are eating up Israel's wildlife and stray cats and dogs, according to reports. Workers of European origin frequently get drunk. Undoubtedly both help support Israel's prostitution industry which also brings in foreign workers – Russian non-Jews – imported for the trade. None of this is unique to Israel, rather it is a common feature of globalization and has hit Israel in the same way that globalization is affecting other aspects of Israel's economy and society.”

Moreover, beyond this xenophobic attitude, the public discourse highlights the threat of the workers on the ethno-national characteristics of Israel:

“Foreign Workers in Israel are a problem. Why are they a problem? Since they are so many (around 300,000 legal and illegal), and since they are going to be reproduced... They will transform the Jewish State into a Multi-National state... How can we avoid such destiny? By deportation of Foreign Workers in advance. The most efficient way, which is also human, is to tax heavily employers...” (Kondor 1997: 1).

Indeed, ethnic heterogeneity and cultural differences, which are the very characteristics of global migration, have infiltrated the vision of purified national spaces. In this context the Israeli case shares similarities with other examples of anti-migration debates that are focused on both national rhetoric that involve identity issues such as Huntington's 'who are we' debate (Huntington 2004) as well as economic arguments concerning the way in which 'foreigners' are taking 'our' jobs:

"The unemployment rate hinges primarily on two factors: the GDP growth rate and the number of non-Israeli workers (including Palestinians and foreigners). The economic policy of the government has no control in the short term over the rate of growth, but it certainly can control the number of non-Israeli workers. The social consideration and concern for the unemployed necessitates support of a drastic reduction in the number of foreign workers, both those with a permit, and those who reside and work without a permit" (Ministry of Finance Report 2002).

Non-Jewish working migration in general and circular migration in particular are seen as a pragmatic solution for two issues: (a) the shortage of Palestinian workers following the geopolitical conditions and (b) the necessity to compete in the global market. However, it seems that Israel is an attractive destination for workers; during the years 1995-2001 the number of workers that have entered as tourists and stayed as workers (illegally) stands on 139,000. During 2002, the number decreased by 11 percent.⁶ Since then this tendency continues: in 2005 the number was 80,000 and in 2006 84,000 (CBS, 2006). It is also important to mention that Israeli NGOs active in protecting the rights of the workers have promoted the 1991 set of laws and regulations that were passed in order protect the rights of foreign workers in Israel. The law (1991-1) includes: the protection of the workers' working conditions, health insurance, the right for appropriate dwellings, the responsibilities of the employer, and the protection of complainants (<http://www.moit.gov.il>).

D. Circular migration as a solution?

Following the discussion in the above sections, let me suggest that the current setting does not support the idea of circular migration. The reason is twofold: (a) most workers arrive to Israel is from distanced countries (Thai workers in agriculture for example) and (b) it might cause less control on the number of workers entering to Israel and staying illegally. Survey results (Ministry of Industry and Employment, 2003) support this argument: only 17.9 percent of the workers have worked in Israel previously.

Furthermore, in Israel, the law and regulations allow private manpower agencies to "import" workers. These agencies have to prove the need of labor and this issue is often part of the political debates (example: when the Migration Authority has been established there was a lot of pressure of the agricultural sector to import more labor power). The privatization of this process is also reflected in the level of the public and political discourse, where circular migration might be seen as an additional way allowing workers to stay illegally in Israel and as a "problem" that private interests create.

In order to create the adequate conditions for circular migration in Israel several preconditions are needed:

⁶ We assume that this followed the establishment of the Migration Authority.

1. Relatively close geographical distance from countries of origin (Middle East, East Europe and the FSU)
2. Close coordination with the different economic activities (such as agricultural unions)
3. Bilateral agreements/regulations concerning the number of workers, their skills and rights
4. Transformation in the public discourse concerning the status of the workers and their contribution to the Israeli economy.

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