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# CIRCULAR MIGRATION IN ISRAEL

*Yinon Cohen*

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**CARIM Analytic and Synthetic Notes 2008/11**

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**Circular Migration Series**

*Demographic and Economic Module*

Cooperation project on the social integration of immigrants, migration, and the movement of persons (CARIM)

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**CARIM**  
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**for Applied Research on International Migration**

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**Demographic and Economic Module**  
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**Circular Migration in Israel**  
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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](http://www.carim.org)

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## **Abstract**

The four streams of migration from and to Israel since the early 1950s to the year 2006 have been presented, depending on who moves, to/from where and for which purpose. The circularity of each group is discussed and the paper provides information regarding the profile of migrants focusing on the skill level which depends clearly on the periods and the countries of origin. Information is also given on country of origin, age, gender, and industry.

The First stream of Israeli migration is composed of Jews and their non Jewish family members migrating to stay and live in Israel. The second stream is of non-Jewish labor migrants. It is divided in two groups: Palestinian residents of the West Bank and Gaza who were recruited to work in Israel; their number is determined more by the intensity of the Israeli - Palestinian conflict and overseas, non-Arab, labor migrants, recruited from various countries in Eastern Europe, Asia, Africa, and South America. These are expected to be temporary workers but some of them become irregular.

The third stream is of native born Israelis, Jews and Arabs, as well as of Jewish immigrants who came to Israel and decide to leave it after few years. Thus, there are two main groups in this stream: native born Israelis, and foreign-born Israelis.

The fourth stream of migration is that of returning Israelis. Some of them can be labeled as circular migrants, mainly because a substantial number of them spend more than one period working abroad. Finally, it is suggested that a European program of circular migration for skilled workers should consider Israel as a source country.

## **Résumé**

Les quatre type de flux de migration partant de et allant vers Israël depuis le début des années 1950 jusqu'à l'année 2006 ont été présentés. Les flux se distinguent selon les personnes en mobilité, leur origine/destination et leur motif de mobilité. Chaque type de flux est examiné selon la satisfaction du critère de circularité au sens large.

Le premier type de flux de migration israélienne est composé des juifs, et les membres non juifs de leurs familles, qui ont migré pour s'installer et vivre en Israël. Le second flux est composé de travailleurs migrants non juifs. Il est composé de deux groupes : les palestiniens résidents en Cisjordanie et à la bande de Gaza, recrutés par Israël et dont le nombre est variable selon l'intensité du conflit israélo-palestinien, et les migrants non arabes d'outre-mer, provenant de l'Europe de l'Est, Asie, Afrique et Amérique du Sud. Ceux-là sont supposés être des travailleurs temporaires mais une partie d'entre, prolongeant leur séjour, tombent dans l'irrégularité.

Le troisième flux est composé aussi bien de personnes nées en Israël, juifs et arabes, que d'immigrants juifs qui viennent en Israël et décident de repartir quelques années après. Ainsi, il y a deux principaux groupes : les israéliens nés en Israël et ceux qui sont nés à l'étranger.

Le quatrième flux migratoire est celui des israéliens de retour dont quelques uns peuvent être désignés comme des migrants circulaires, surtout parce qu'ils ont passé plus d'une période de travail à l'étranger. Enfin, il a été proposé qu'un éventuel programme européen de migration circulaire de personnes qualifiées devrait considérer Israël comme un pays de départ.

There are four major migration streams from and to Israel. In the following pages I will consider briefly these streams, discuss which of them can be labeled as circular migration (broadly defined), and provide some information regarding the socio economic characteristics of the immigrants, and the skill level of emigrants and returnees.

**First**, there is a stream of Jews (and their non Jewish family members) coming to stay and live in Israel. With some exceptions in the early 1950s, Israel has always attempted to bring as many Jews as possible to Israel, and there seems to have been no upper limit to the number of Jewish immigrants it has been willing to admit in a given period. Moreover, unlike other migration countries that prefer skilled and young immigrants, Israel's declared policy is to admit all Jewish immigrants, with no regard to age, educational level, ethnic origin, and skin color, as well as labor market conditions. In general, it is fair to conclude that since 1954 actual migration patterns have been consistent with this declared policy. In total, about 3 million Jewish immigrants (including non Jewish family members) came to Israel since 1948. The most recent wave started in December 1989 from the Former Soviet Union (FSU), and until 2006 brought about 1 million immigrants to Israel. The second largest source country of Jewish immigrants to Israel since 1980 is Ethiopia (about 73,000 immigrants), and the third largest is the US.

While Israel actively attracts and accepts all Jews, not all Jews choose to immigrate to Israel. With time, however, the type of people who chose Israel as their destination has changed.<sup>1</sup> In the first two decades after independence, many immigrants were stateless refugees, and others fled repressive regimes in Eastern Europe, and Arab states that were in conflict with the new Jewish state. Many of those who could have gone to a more developed state went there; those residing in developed countries in Western Europe, North America, and Australia did not consider immigrating to Israel. Consequently, the immigrants arriving in Israel in the first twenty years after statehood had lower educational levels than the resident Jewish population of Israel.

Following the 1967 war, the type of immigrants choosing Israel as their country of destination changed. For religious, ideological and economic reasons, immigrants from Western Europe and America, mostly highly educated, have begun coming to Israel. Immigrants arriving from the Soviet Union and other countries in Eastern Europe, Africa and Asia were of higher educational levels than their predecessors coming from the same countries in the 1950s and 1960s. Apparently, Israel of the post-1967 period has become a more attractive destination for educated immigrants. The average immigrant coming to Israel during the mass migration of 1948 to 1951, had 7.4 years of schooling, compared to 10.4 years among native-born Israelis<sup>2</sup>. This gap between recently-arrived immigrants and native Jews gradually narrowed over the years until 1972, when recently arrived immigrants and natives had the same average years of schooling. Eleven years later, in 1983, recent immigrants surpassed natives by 1.3 years, and this trend continued until 1992, when the first and largest wave of immigration from the post-communist Former Soviet Union (FSU) ended.

Since 1992 the immigrants coming from the largest source county, the FSU, are of lower educational level than their predecessors. Those arriving from the FSU during 1989 to 1991 belonged to the first wave which brought some 400,000 immigrants to Israel. In subsequent years, up until 2000, the annual number of immigrants from the FSU was around 60,000 to 80,000. The schooling levels of those arriving in the first wave were significantly higher (14 years on average) than that of those arriving after 1992 (13 years). Apparently, in the post-1991 years more FSU immigrants, especially the educated, have been seeking other destinations, most notably the US, Canada, and more recently, Germany, which in 2002 took more FSU Jews (about 22,000) than either Israel or the US. In the post-

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<sup>1</sup> This section is based on Cohen (2002).

<sup>2</sup> The benchmark to which immigrants' schooling is compared is composed of third-generation Israeli Jews. Immigrants' years of schooling refer to the educational levels of immigrant men at the time they arrived Israel.

1989 period, the second largest source country, after the FSU, has been Ethiopia. In the early 1980s, the educational levels of Ethiopian immigrants were very low. Those who arrived in the 1990s were of similar educational level and perhaps even lower than their predecessors. Thus, immigrants arriving from the two largest source countries, comprising nearly 90 percent of the immigrants during the 1990s, were of lower educational levels than their predecessors (and were also lower than levels of the native population of Israel). Interestingly, Jewish immigrants from the FSU who arrived during the 1990s to Canada (Lewin-Epstein et al., 2003) or the US (Cohen and Haberfeld, 2007) were of higher educational levels than their counterparts who came to Israel; however, those arriving to Germany in the 1990s were of similar educational level as those coming to Israel (Cohen and Kogan, 2005 & 2007). In short, in the competition for educated immigrants from the FSU, Israel performs rather well vs. Germany, but loses to the US and Canada.

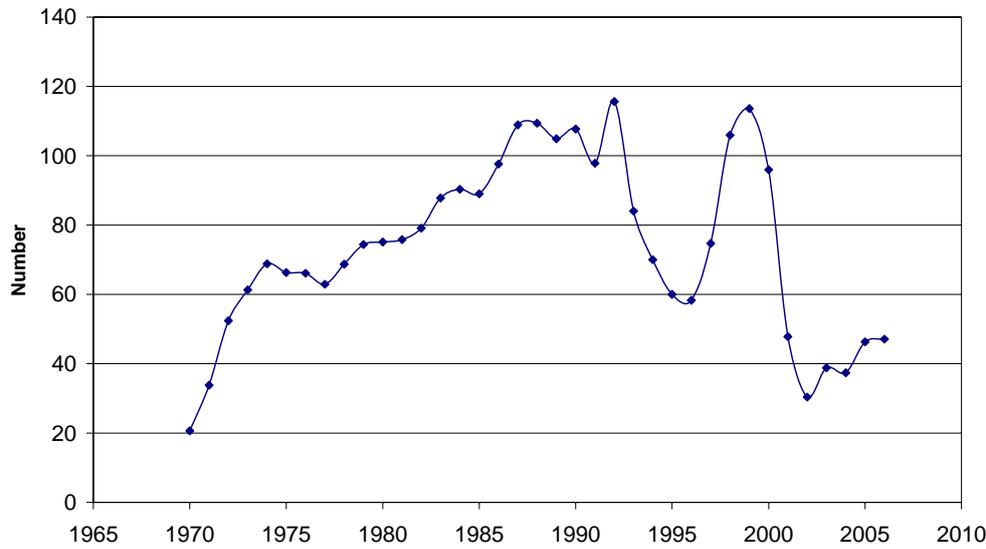
To be sure, shifts from low to high education countries (e.g., from Yemen to the USSR) contributed to much of the rise in immigrants' years of schooling during 1948 to 1991 and the decline since 1992. However, most of the rise in immigrants' schooling level and the decline since 1992 occurred because of changes over time in the education level of successive immigrant cohorts coming from the same countries, especially the FSU (i.e. changes within the same country).

These immigrants, for the most part, cannot be considered as circular migrants. There is, however, a recent trend of French and American Jewish families who immigrate to Israel, while the heads of the families, normally the men, continue working in the source countries, and commute between their source countries and Israel. This group of professional and self employed immigrants is relatively small and not much is known about its composition or size.

## Labor Migrants

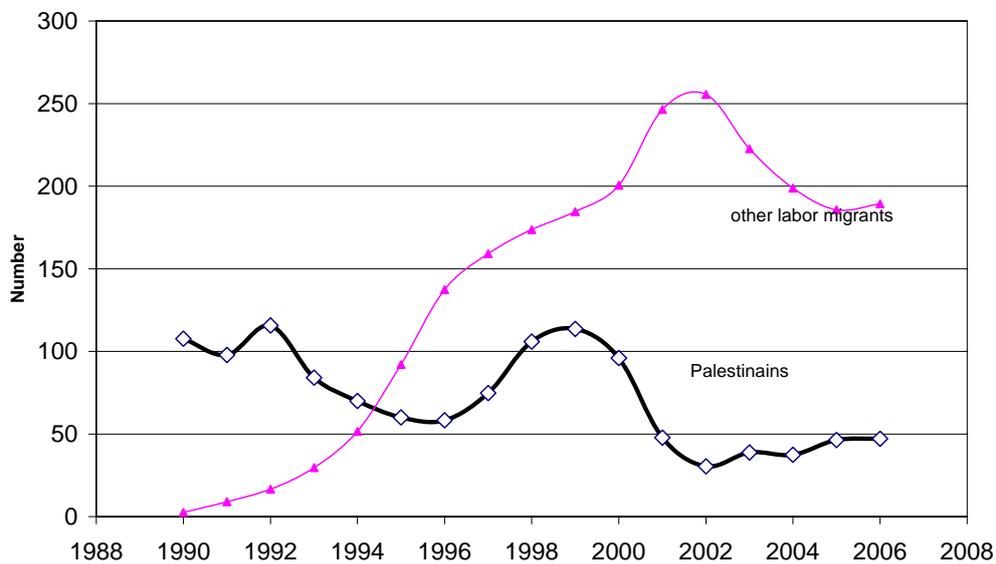
The **second** stream of immigration to Israel is of non-Jewish labor migrants. There are two main groups of such workers. First are the **Palestinian residents of the West Bank and Gaza** who were recruited to work in Israel following the 1967 war. Their number increased until 1993, when Israel decided to replace these groups with overseas, non-Arab, labor migrants. However, contrary to popular perceptions, there are still tens of thousands Palestinian workers in Israel's labor market. They are not regarded as migrants by either Israel or the Palestinian authority, and their movement is governed more by the intensity of the Israeli Palestinian conflict than by economic needs of either the migrants or the Israeli government. As shown in Figure 1, the number of Palestinian workers from the Occupied Territories in Israel's labor market reached a peak in 1993. At that year the government of Israel, for a variety of reason (security consideration, pressures by employers) increased sharply the number of labor migrants from other countries, and blocked the entrance of Palestinians. As a result, the number of Palestinian residents of the West Bank and the Gaza strip working in Israel declined sharply from 115,000 in 1993 to about 58,000 in 1996, about half of them undocumented. At that year (1996) the Israeli government reduced the number of work permits for international labor migrants, and as a result the number of Palestinian workers increased again, reaching a peak of 96,000 in 2000, just before the breakout of the second Intifada. Following the second Intifada and Israel's general policy of "separation" the number of Palestinian workers from the occupied west bank in Israel has declined to about 30,000 in 2002. However, since then the number has risen again to 47,000 in 2006 (Bank of Israel 2006). Of these, 13,000 were "documented", that is, received their wages via the payment department of the employment service (Central Bureau of Statistics, 2007); the remaining 34,000 workers are undocumented, and are composed of two groups: commuters who cross the green line everyday, and those residing illegally in Israel for longer spells. It should be noted that the figure of 47,000 workers suggests that as late as 2006, the Palestinians are one of the largest groups, if not the largest, of non citizen laborers in Israel, that is, de facto labor migrants.

**Figure 1a: Number of non-citizen Palestinian workers in Israel, 1970-2006 (thousands)**



Source: Bank of Israel.

**Figure 1b: Number of labor migrants from overseas and number of non-citizen Palestinian workers in Israel, 1990-2006**



Source: Bank of Israel, annual report, 2006.

Not much is known on the characteristics of post 1993 Palestinian workers in Israel. One of the consequences of the separation principle, is that since the early 1990s Israel has gradually lost interest in the well being of Palestinian residents of the Occupied territories, including those working in Israel (Gordon, 2008). Thus, hardly any data is published in Israel about these workers. In addition, the

influx of labor migrants from overseas that started in 1993 led most researchers, government agencies and NGOs to focus on this latter group, and neglect the study of post-1993 non-citizen Palestinian workers in Israel. This being the case, we know less today on Palestinian workers in Israel than in the 1970s and 1980s, when this group was studied by both Israeli and Palestinian researchers. From CBS data, presented in Table 1, we know that among the documented Palestinian workers, over half work in construction, and about 20% in Agriculture.

**Table 1. Employee Jobs of documented Non-citizen Palestinian workers from the West Bank and Gaza in Israel by industry, 1998-2006 (thousands)**

	Agriculture	Construction	Total
1998	19.9	6.4	36.9
1999	17.9	6.5	35.0
2000	13.8	4.9	27.7
2001	1.4	1.0	3.8
2002	2.6	2.9	6.4
2003	7.9	2.9	12.6
2004	4.8	2.3	8.5
2005	6.7	2.4	11.4
2006	7.8	2.5	13.0

Source, Israeli Statistical Abstract 2007, Table 12.34

Palestinian workers in Israel are not considered as “migrants”, nor are they governed by the same agencies governing the employment of international labor migrants. To be sure, this is mainly due to Israel’s complex relations with the Palestinian authority. Yet, it is likely that under normal conditions both parties – the Palestinian authority and Israel – would greatly benefit from labor migration of Palestinian workers to Israel. Indeed, this was the understanding in some of the Oslo agreements and even in the Hebron agreement of 1997. Unfortunately, the relations between Israel and the Palestinian authority since 2000 are such that there is no serious discussion about labor migration. If and when the peace process will resume, such discussions will likely take place.

The second type of **non-citizen workers in Israel are labor migrants** that were recruited by Israel starting in the late 1980s, and especially since 1993, **from various countries in Eastern Europe, Asia, Africa, and South America**. Israel expected them to be *temporary* workers, but for a variety of reasons,<sup>3</sup> many of them overstay their visas and become unauthorized migrants, while others come as tourists and join the labor market. As in most democracies, Israel does not know the precise number of labor migrants it has in a given time. Available estimates (Bank of Israel, 2006) for the end of 2005 are around 200,000; about two-thirds of them are undocumented, that is de facto permanent residents.

Data availability: The coverage of labor migrants by income surveys or labor force surveys that are conducted by the Israeli Central Bureau of Statistics is not satisfactory. Undocumented migrants are not covered at all, while other migrants are covered only partially. This being the case, official data on labor migrants are limited to those who entered with a work permit, and include information only on country of origin, age, gender, industry and wages. In addition, there are some data which are based on small samples and partial administrative data collected by independent researchers, government agencies, and NGOs (mostly human right organizations). Below I focus mostly on official data published by the Israeli Central Bureau of Statistics (CBS).

<sup>3</sup> See Kepm and Rajman (2008) for the comprehensive history and politics of labor migration in Israel.

Table 2 presents the distribution of labor migrants who entered Israel with a work permit (that is, documented migrants) by countries of origin, gender, and age. The data are presented for both 1996 and 2006.

**Table 2. Countries of origin, Gender, and age: Documented labor migrants who entered Israel in 1996 and 2006**

Gender & age	Number (000)		% Men		% Older than 49	
	2006	1996	2006	1996	2006	1996
Country of origin						
TOTAL	32.7	90.8	54	89	6.6	6.4
<i>Asia - total</i>	24.4	36.8	62	85	1.5	3.7
India	1.1	0.4	53	89	2.1	4.9
Turkey	1.1	9.0	100	97	6.0	2.3
Nepal	2.8	---	17	---	0.1	---
China	3.3	3.6	99	98	0.6	0.9
Philippines	6.4	3.2	14	19	3.0	3.3
Thailand	9.0	14.9	93	92	0.1	0.5
Other <sup>1</sup>	0.7	5.7	52	77	6.8	15.6
<i>Africa</i>	0.1	0.4	82	76	15.2	12.4
<i>Europe</i>	8.0	49.8	30	93	21.9	8.1
Bulgaria	0.4	3.3	20	97	49.6	9.4
FSU	4.3	4.4	19	89	15.8	4.8
Germany	0.1	0.5	93	55	24.1	11.9
UK	0.1	0.4	89	68	22.6	15.8
Romania	2.6	37.9	38	95	25.6	8.1
Other	0.5	3.3	67	73	32.3	11.2
<i>America</i>	0.2	1.4	90	70	21.1	18.9
USA	0.1	1.0	90	69	25.9	21.2
Other	0.1	0.4	38	71	17.1	13.6
Unknown	--	2.4	---	90	---	6.9

<sup>1</sup>In 1996 including workers from Southern Lebanon

Source: Israeli Statistical Abstract, 2007, Table 4.11; Israeli Statistical Abstract 2001, Table 4.10.

The number of labor migrants who were admitted in 2006 (32,700) is far below the number admitted in 1996 (90,800). This reflects the change in Israel's policy to reduce the number of labor migrants in Israel. 1996 was the last year of what Kepm and Riajman (2008) call "the party of the labor migrants" where Israel moved in full force to replace Palestinian workers with non-Arab, overseas labor migrants, and employers succeeded in getting nearly as many workers as they wanted, especially in the construction and agriculture industries. The distribution of the source countries from which the immigrants arrived in Israel and their gender composition confirm this observation: The largest source countries in 1996 were Romania, Thailand, and Turkey. Romania and Turkey sent mostly men to the construction industry. Thailand is the source country for agricultural workers. It should be noted that the data presented in Table 2 do not include domestic workers, mostly from the Philippines. Thus, including domestic helpers who attend the Israeli elderly, the number of entrants with work permits in 1996 was 106,161 (Kemp and Rajman 2008), and the Philippines was one of the largest source countries.

By 2006, the number of workers declined, and the distribution of source countries has somewhat changed. While agricultural workers from Thailand continue to be one of the largest groups (in 2006 they are the largest, perhaps second only to the Philippines, whose domestic workers are not included in Table 2), Romania and Turkey are no longer among the top three source countries. By 2006, women from the European republics of the FSU, and men from China and Nepal are among the largest new groups of documented labor migrants.

The percentage of workers who are 50 years or older is suggestive of the skill level of the migrants. The older the age, I assume, the higher is the skill level. Thus, agricultural workers are very young and unskilled, while a minority of the construction workers from Turkey and Romania, especially in 2006 are of higher skill. Chinese workers are less skilled, as are virtually all labor migrants from Asia. Notwithstanding that some labor migrants in construction are skilled workers, migrant workers including Palestinians from the Occupied Territories comprise nearly half of all employees in the construction industry. Perhaps more significant is the fact that migrants occupy most of the less skilled jobs in this industry, but not the high skilled jobs. In agriculture and domestic help virtually all migrant workers are unskilled, hence it is evident that labor migrants in the Israeli labor market fill the so called “bad”, secondary jobs, that Israeli native do not wish to occupy. Having said that, note that Table 2 tells us that there are a few hundreds migrant workers from the developed country in the West – the UK, Germany, and the US. These are most likely highly skilled, white collar workers in a variety of occupations and industries.

The industrial distribution for the stock of documented labor migrants (Table 3) is provided for only two industries – construction and agriculture – of the main three industries employing labor migrants. The third industry, domestic help, that by 2006 is probably the largest, is missing from the Central Bureau of Statistic reports.<sup>4</sup> According to Table 3, in all years since 1998 (and probably before), over 50 percent of documented workers are in either construction or agriculture. Until 2002 nearly half the documented migrant population was in agriculture but the proportion dropped to less than 20% since 2004. By contrast, the share of construction increased from about 25% of the total in 2002, to slightly more than a third since 2003. The vast majority of other documented workers are domestic helpers whose number, according to a government report (cited in Kemp and Raijman, 2008) more than tripled between 1996 and 2002.

**Table 3. Employee Jobs of documented labor migrants from overseas in Israel by industry, 1970-2006 (thousands)**

Year	Agriculture		Construction		Total Number
	Number	%	Number	%	
1998	37.6	47	20.1	25	79.3
1999	32.5	42	20.4	27	76.5
2000	32.2	42	20.6	26	78.0
2001	39.5	44	22.0	25	89.2
2002	40.6	44	22.8	25	93.0
2003	24.3	34	23.7	33	72.3
2004	10.8	18	21.9	36	60.1
2005	10.8	17	23.3	37	63.1
2006	11.7	18	22.6	34	65.9

Source: Israeli Statistical Abstract, 2007, Table 12.34

<sup>4</sup> This is due to the method of data collection for obtaining information about labor migrants. The CBS samples establishments and not households, hence domestic workers are not represented.

## Undocumented labor migrants

According to various estimates, the number of labor migrants with no work permit has risen from about 10,000 in 1990 to a peak of 150,000 in 2002. Since then, in part due to Israel's aggressive deportation policy, the number declined to around 100,000 or more. However, attempts to reduce the number above have not been successful probably because of the revolving door policy, where new work permits are issued at the same time that other immigrants are deported. About half the undocumented workers are residents of tens of less developed countries in America, Africa and Asia who entered Israel with a tourist visa and overstayed their visa. In both the 1990s and 2004, the leading source countries for workers who overstay their tourist visas, accounting for about 25% of the total, are the republics of the FSU. Other major source countries for such workers are Jordan, Romania, and the Philippines (Central Bureau of Statistics, cited in Kemp and Rajman 2008). The other half of the undocumented population is composed of migrants who entered Israel with a work permit but either left their employers to another employer (according to Israeli law, once a worker leaves an employer with no permission, he or she becomes an "illegal resident"), or overstayed their work permit.

While undocumented labor migrants work in similar industries as their documented counterparts (with the exception of perhaps greater concentration of the undocumented in the domestic help and sex industries), their educational level is relatively high. One study of immigrants from South America and Africa reports that 17% of South American and 25% of African immigrants are university graduates. In their source countries these migrants held high status occupations compared to their jobs in Israel (Kemp and Rajman 2008).

The impact of labor migrants on wages and unemployment in Israel is a subject about which there is some debate. While the Finance Ministry advances the notion that migrant labor harm employment levels of native Israelis, it is not clear if Israeli workers would fill the jobs in agriculture, construction and domestic help, if these jobs were vacant. Available evidence suggests that Israelis will not take less skilled jobs in agriculture for the wage level prevailing in this industry. Domestic help is a new employment niche that was "born" only once cheap labor become available. With construction there were some attempts to lure Israeli workers to join the industry, but according to employers these attempts were not too successful.

With respect to wages, however, it is likely that the stagnation in the wages of low skilled workers in Israel in the past 20 years is in large part due to the influx of cheap migrant labor. But the impact is limited to wages in low skilled jobs. Thus, the Israeli middle class and upper middle class greatly benefits from migrant labor.

The data about circularity – number of work spells, intended stay, etc. are not readily available. Available estimates suggest that most workers (about 80%), who enter Israel with a work permit, do it only once. Many come from far away counties, pay thousands of dollars to various agencies; hence they need to stay for a relatively long time just to repay their investments. If Israel wishes to implement a program of circular migration it should consider workers from the region – Palestinians, Jordanians and Egyptians – who can either commute to work in Israel or stay in Israel for short spells with minimal transportation costs.

## Emigration, return migration, and selectivity

The **third** stream is of **emigrants**. This stream is composed of native born Israelis (Jews and Arabs), as well as of Jewish immigrants who came to Israel and decide to leave it after a few years. Thus, there are two main groups in this stream: native born Israelis, and foreign-born Israelis.

Despite popular and some scholarly writing to the contrary, the rate of emigration from Israel is not high relative to emigration rates in other immigration counties. According to the border police (which

keeps count of all exits and entries among Israeli residents) only about 8% of the nearly one million immigrants who came to Israel since 1989 have left it until the end of 2005 (or emigrated to a third country) (Sheps, 2007). Some of the returnees (an unknown number) maintain close contacts with Israel, come often to visit, have business and family connections in both the FSU and Israel, and at times maintain dual residencies in both countries. By contrast to FSU immigrants, US immigrants to Israel have very high rates (around two thirds, by one estimate) of emigration to the US. Some of them (the numbers are unknown) work in the US, while their families live in Israel. They are invariably highly skilled professionals.

The emigration rate of Israeli-born is even lower. Analyses of US census data suggest that the number of Israeli-born Jewish immigrants in the US in 2000 was about 130,000. The respective figure in 1990s was 110,000. The total number of Israelis living in the US, including those not born in Israel, is more difficult to estimate. In 1990 the estimate, based on data from the US census and the Immigration and Naturalization Service, ranges from 30,000 to 55,000 for Israeli born Jewish emigrants (Cohen and Haberfeld, 1997). Assuming that between 1990 and 2000 this group grew at the same rate as the Israeli-born in the US, the total of number of Israelis in the US in 2000 (Israeli born and foreign born) is around 200,000. Given that the US is the destination country for at least one half of Israeli emigrants, the total number of Israeli emigrants (Israeli-born Jews plus Jewish immigrants to Israel who eventually left Israel) in 2000, is at most 400,000. The estimate presented to the Israeli Parliament by the CBS (Central Bureau of Statistics) – a total of 554,000 emigrants during 1948-2001 (Staetsky, 2004) – includes emigrants who died abroad. Without this group<sup>5</sup> the CBS estimate for the stock of Israeli Jews abroad at the end of 2001 is below 450,000,<sup>6</sup> and not much higher than my above estimate (350-400 thousands), which is based on the US data.

Not surprisingly, estimates published by organizations responsible for advancing Israel's demographic missions, are higher than those of the CBS. The Israeli Ministry of Absorption, to take one example, estimated that at the end of 2003 there were 750,000 Israeli emigrants living abroad. This figure was cited uncritically by some academics (Gould and Moav, 2006) despite the fact that it is inconsistent with the lower CBS estimates. Such estimates probably include, in addition to emigrants who died abroad, children born aboard to emigrant parents, and non-Israeli spouses of emigrants. Gross over-estimation of the Israeli Diaspora is not a new phenomenon, nor limited to groups with vested interests in high numbers. In the late 1970s a leading sociologist estimated that in the US alone there were 350,000 Israelis (Kass and Lipset, 1979), stating that Jewish emigration of such magnitude threatens the very existence of Israel. Estimates published by the Jewish Agency were even higher, up to half a million in the US (Lahis, 1980).

Perhaps the prevailing notion that the Israeli community in the US is larger than its true size is rooted in the popular perception that every Israeli ever residing abroad is an emigrant. It is true that the number of all Israelis who ever spent a year abroad is much higher than the estimate for the stock of Israeli emigrants abroad in a particular year. However, the assumption that all those leaving Israel forever stay in their new destination is erroneous. Rather, rates of return migration to Israel are higher than to most other sending countries (Cohen and Haberfeld, 2001).

Thus, the **fourth stream** of migration is that of **returning Israelis**. Indeed, analyses of data drawn from the 1980 and 1990 US censuses suggest that about one third of Israeli-born who came to the US between 1975 and 1980, returned to Israel prior to 1990. Given the growing Israeli economy in the 1990s, it is reasonable to expect that the rates of return migration during 1990-2000 were at least as high as they were in the 1980s. Moreover, this rate of return migration was derived from immigrants who resided in the US for an average of 2.5 years, and for as many as 5 years. Most immigrants

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<sup>5</sup> The CBS estimates that there are between 64,000 and 107,000 emigrants who died abroad (Sheps, 2007; Hleihel and Ben-Moshe 2002).

<sup>6</sup> For a similar CBS estimate for the stock of emigrants at end of 1999 see Hleihel and Ben-Moshe (2002).

returning to their home countries do so one to two years after immigration. Thus, the above estimate is a lower bound because it omits from the calculation all those who immigrated to the US, and returned to Israel during 1975-1980. An upper bound for the rate of return migration among Israelis abroad can be estimated using data collected by the Israeli border police. These data suggests that the rate of return migration among Israelis who resided abroad for 1-2 years was nearly two-thirds (Cohen and Haberfeld 2001).

Israeli emigrants have been of higher educational level than the population from which they were drawn (Cohen 1996, 2002). In 2000 over 50% of Israeli emigrants in the US have universities degrees, compared to less than 25% in Israel. Likewise, their age distribution, similar to the distribution of other economic migrants, is disproportionately young. These facts (which are not new – Israeli emigrants of the 1970 and 1980s were also young and educated) led some scholars to label emigration from Israel as a “brain drain” (Gold and Moav, 2006). Interestingly, however, there is evidence that the average schooling level of returning Israelis from the US is higher than the levels among those who stayed abroad, suggesting that selectivity to return to Israel is positive, at least on education (Cohen and Haberfeld, 2001). Apparently, some of the “sharpest brains” return to Israel, and have a positive effect on the Israeli society and economy. For one thing, they find jobs in Israel’s universities and advanced industries. For another, many of them hold key positions in social networks connecting Israel and the US. These networks play an important role in the economic and scientific development of Israel. Therefore, labelling emigration of educated Israelis as a “brain drain” is at best an exaggeration, and certainly misses the positive implications of the movement of highly educated Israelis between Israel and the US. Moreover, some of the “returnees” do not return for good, but rather continue to move back and forth between Israel and their destination country thereby strengthening the connections between the economies of Israel and destination countries in Europe and America.

The emigration patterns of the past seven years, since the outbreak of second Intifada, however, raised increased concern in Israel. The annual number of emigrants has risen from about 14,000 in 1996-2000, to 20,000 in 2002-2003, when the number of terrorists attacks were the highest; and an increasing number of Israeli Jews have been applying for immigrant visas to the US, Canada, and Australia (Lustick 2004). Furthermore, for the first time, many Israelis have been applying for citizenship in European countries which are already part of, or soon to be part of, the European Union (e.g. Germany, Poland, Hungary, Romania and Bulgaria). Many of them do not expect to immigrate to any of these countries. Rather, according to reports in the popular press they are seeking `insurance` for themselves and their children in case the political and economic situation in Israel will deteriorate. Whether or not many Israelis will use their new European passports for emigration, is a matter of speculation. Past experience suggests that most Israelis, especially the Israeli-born, either do not emigrate, and most of those that do, eventually return to Israel. Indeed the latest figures available from the Central Bureau of Statistics suggest that with the relative decline in terrorist attacks inside Israel, as well as the improved economy, the number of emigrants declined to 16,000 in 2004 and 14,000 in 2005 (from the peak of 20,000 in 2002). Evidently, the long term viability of Israel’s success in keeping Israelis from leaving, and attracting those living abroad to return, has been continuing in the 21st century.

Some returning Israelis can be labelled as circular migrants, mainly because a substantial number of them spend more than one period working abroad. Members of some professional groups, especially academics, scientists and medical doctors, spend their sabbatical years abroad, often working for a hospital, university or a business enterprise abroad. The number of such sabbatical workers is substantial. Anecdotal evidence suggests that if more opportunities were available for short term migration, there would be enough skilled Israelis who would be willing to try them. Past experience suggest that Israelis tend to return to their home country. Hence European countries seeking to implement a program of circular migration for skilled workers should consider Israel as the source country for such workers.

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