IMMIGRATION AND INTEGRATION POLICIES SINCE 1990 IN ISRAEL

ABSTRACT

Existing limitations on immigration to Palestine enforced by the British Mandate Government during the 1930s and 1940s were abolished and the borders were opened. Mass immigration during 1948-1951, which doubled the existing Jewish population of some 600,000, was of utmost importance in the growth and development of the country. Israel's main focus is the ingathering of the Jewish people to their historical homeland. The size and structure of this immigration are due to many factors, which influence the volume of emigration from the Jewish diaspora communities throughout the world. During the mid-1980s a new concept of integration began to evolve meant to encourage and increase immigration from the Western countries. This article proposes a look at immigration in Israel, touching upon migrants' arrival, geographic distribution, employment, language acquisition, cultural integration, education, and identity. Immigrants have done, on the whole, extremely well.

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With the establishment of the State of Israel on May 15, 1948, existing limitations on immigration to Palestine enforced by the British Mandate Government during the 1930s and 1940s were abolished and the borders were opened on the basis of the opening statement of the Declaration of Independence: "The State of Israel will be open to the immigration of Jews and the ingathering of exiles." Israel's fundamental law, the *Law of Return*, passed in 1950, states: "Every Jew has the right to immigrate to the Land of Israel." A second law passed in 1952, the *Law of Citizenship*, guarantees Israeli citizenship to all who enter the country under the *Law of Return* along with all the obligations and rights of a citizen including the right to vote. The *Law of Return* was modified for humanistic reasons in 1970 to enable non-Jewish relatives of Jews to immigrate and obtain citizenship.

Mass immigration during 1948-1951, which doubled the existing Jewish population of some 600,000, was of utmost importance in the growth and development of the country. These immigrants were mainly refugees from the displaced person camps set up in Europe in the aftermath of World War II, and from Arab countries who declared war on Israel upon its establishment. The immigration of over 3 million immigrants to Israel since its inception has occurred in waves. Following the 1948-1951 peak, other peaks occurred in 1955-1957 (mainly from North Africa, Poland and Hungary), 1961-1964 (mainly from North Africa and Romania), 1971-1973 and 1978-1979 (both mainly from the Soviet Union) and 1989-2000 (mainly from the Soviet Union), which has been the longest period of sustained immigration. Since then immigration decreased by some 30% per annum levelling off at 23,000 since 2003.

The size and structure of this immigration are due to many factors, which influence the volume of emigration from the Jewish diaspora communities throughout the world. Such factors include:

a) the size and structure of the population of these communities;
b) the general political, economic and social conditions in the countries of origin and in particular the condition of the Jews and the attitudes and behaviours of the local population towards them;
c) the degree of freedom to emigrate, with or without one's capital;
d) the availability of alternative potential immigration destinations besides Israel;
e) the influence of ideological factors (Zionist, religious and others) in channeling immigration towards Israel;
f) economic and social conditions in Israel;
g) Israeli policy in facilitating immigrants in their integration; and
h) the warmth extended by the veteran population towards new immigrants.

Acceptance of refugees

Israel's main focus is the ingathering of the Jewish people to their historical homeland. Many of the Jewish immigrants arrived as refugees. Most notably were those from the displaced person camps

set up in Europe after World War II, from the Arab and Muslim countries after Israel's War of Independence, from the Communist countries of Eastern Europe and from Ethiopia.

Israel has also accepted non-Jewish refugees. In 1977 it accepted two groups of boat people from Vietnam, in 1995 a group of Bosnian-Muslims, and in 1998 two groups of Muslim refugees from Kosovo. These groups received almost all the benefits and aid that are provided to Jewish immigrants.

Immigration since 1989

The most recent wave of immigration of more than 1.2 million persons, has mainly come from the areas of the former Soviet Union (85%) and Ethiopia (5%). This wave began after a decade of low immigration during which only 154,000 immigrants entered Israel. By 1989, the Soviet system was breaking down and alternative destinations (mainly the USA) were problematic. Glasnost policy resulted in many Jews and Jewish-related persons immigrating to Israel. In 1990 alone, out of 200,000 immigrants, 185,000 arrived from the former Soviet Union (FSU). This was not only an unprecedented number from one country, but also, except for 1949, an unprecedented total immigration for one year.

During this same period, some 600,000 Jews and their relatives emigrated from the FSU to other countries, primarily to the U.S.A. and Germany.

The second significant component of recent immigration has been from Ethiopia (70,000), where some 15,000 persons were airlifted to Israel in the dramatic "Operation Solomon" which took place during a 36-hour weekend in May 1991. They joined their 17,000 brethren who had arrived in the 1980s. These immigrants were far younger (more than 50% were below the age of 18) and less educated (only a few had high school education or more) than the immigrants from the FSU and other countries. This group, which now numbers close to 100,000 taking into account the natural increase (the fertility rate of Ethiopian women is very high), lives in some 40 cities and towns with heavy concentrations in 15 of these.

On the other hand, 60% of immigrants from the FSU who are above the age of 18 possess postsecondary or university degrees. More than 90% were employed prior to their immigration. Some 38% were employed in scientific and academic professions and another 22% were employed in other professional and technical jobs. Although the benefits of this substantial "brain gain" have not been fully assessed or felt in the economy, many economists have claimed that the very high increase in GDP (6 to 7% per annum) during 1992-1996 was a result of the integration of these highly educated and skilled immigrants into the economy and society.

The median age of FSU immigrants is 33 years. The largest age group (40%) is composed of people aged between 20 and 44. Children younger than 17 constitute over 23% of immigrants, while the proportion aged 65 and over is 12%. An excess of women (52.7% of all immigrants), characterized the FSU immigration. Approximately 63% of adults are married, while approximately 19% are single, 8% are divorced and 10% are widowed.

During the mid-1980s a new concept of integration began to evolve; it was meant, at its inception, to encourage and increase immigration from the Western countries...and was designed to increase the new immigrants' freedom of choice in deciding where to live in the country and in deciding how to spend funds granted to them during their initial period in the country.

Emigration

It is estimated that between 8 and 10% of all immigrants of the last decade re-emigrated, mostly to North America and Western Europe, with some returning to the former Soviet Union. Veteran Israelis also emigrate. It is estimated that some 25,000 to 30,000 do so each year, including immigrants that have chosen to re-immigrate to their original country or to another country, while 12,000 to 15,000 per year have returned during this same period.

Integration policy

During the mid-1980s a new concept of integration began to evolve (for lack of space I am unable to describe two different integration policies, the first from the 1950-1960s and the other from the 1970s); it was meant, at its inception, to encourage and increase immigration from Western countries. The term used to define it was an old one – "direct absorption" – but it now took on a completely different meaning. The concept was designed to increase new immigrants' freedom of choice in deciding where to live in the country and in deciding how to spend funds granted to them during their initial period in the country.

At first, the Ministry of Immigrant Absorption rented rooms in various hotels around the country. Upon arrival the immigrant was told that he might choose any hotel he wanted and could reside there for a period of up to two weeks, or stay with a relative or friend. He received a certain amount of money in cash to take care of his basic needs for that period. He was informed that within that initial period of time he must find an apartment. Once his apartment rented, he should bring the contract to the local office of the Ministry of Immigrant Absorption and he would receive a cheque to cover the rent. A ceiling was set for the maximum amount that the immigrant would be reimbursed. Once the

immigrant was settled in his rented apartment, he was able to register for an *ulpan* (Hebrew acquisition class) and enrol his children in the local kindergarten or school. At the end of each month he would have to provide certification that he was attending *ulpan* classes and would then receive a monthly subsistence allowance. The bureaucracy involved in processing all these requests, as well as others, however, overwhelmed the system, especially as the numbers of new immigrants increased each month with the opening of the gates from the Soviet Union in late 1989.

In the mid-1990s, a new instrument was developed and introduced – the "absorption basket" – in order to increase efficiency and give more freedom to the immigrant in planning and executing his family budget, thus decreasing bureaucracy to a minimum. A computation was made of the average costs of all the financial supports given to each individual immigrant. These included: subsistence allowance for the first six months in the country; rent subsidy for a year; certain educational costs, depending on the age and number of children; transportation costs to and from *ulpan* classes; and a small sum for translating and printing professional resumes and other miscellaneous services.

Upon arrival at the port of entry and filling out registration forms, the immigrant would receive a small sum in cash and a larger sum in the form of a cheque. In order to receive the remainder of the absorption basket on a monthly basis, he had to open a bank account (in a bank of his choice), deposit the cheque he received at the port of arrival and bring a copy of certification of his bank account number to one of the local offices of the Ministry of Immigrant Absorption. The rest of the money was transferred automatically and directly into the immigrant's bank account in differential amounts over the first year. The absorption basket is a grant and the money does not have to be returned. This method has recently been revised in order to eliminate the need to print cheques. The immigrant now receives a somewhat larger sum in cash and is instructed to open a bank account as soon as possible and report the account number to one of the local branch offices. The Ministry of Immigrant Absorption is developing a system of doing away with cash payments altogether and giving the immigrant an electronic money card which will enable him to withdraw money from a machine.

A family consisting of both parents and one child receives about $11,000 for the year. This compares favourably to the annual minimal wage rate in the country, which is $6,000. By law, the absorption basket is indexed to the Cost of Living. Besides the aid given through the absorption basket, immigrants with children under the age of 18 receive the children allowance through National Insurance, which every other resident receives, as well as a "customs' grant." Until 1991 immigrants were allowed to bring into the country personal and durable goods free of customs. The shipping containers of possessions sent by Soviet Union immigrants glutted ports and storage facilities. Immigrants living in temporary rentals didn't empty their shipping conatiners, preferring to wait until they were in permanent housing. The solution to this problem was a change in regulations that made goods imported by immigrants subject to customs and VAT. In lieu of the exemption, immigrants now receive approximately $2,500 as a loan, which after five years becomes a grant, to cover the payment of customs and VAT. After the inauguration of this grant, immigrants stopped sending shipping containers.

Upon completing the first year in the country, immigrants face several options, including the following. 1) The immigrant can remain in his rented apartment or move to another one in the same or another area. For the following five years, the immigrant is eligible for a rental subsidy which begins with some $200 per month (barely covering half of the going rental rates) and decreases by about 20% per year. 2) The immigrant can purchase an apartment using a heavily subsidized mortgage (which hardly covers 50% of the total cost). Some 200,000 family units used mortgages during the past 15 years. Some of the families purchased an apartment together with their elderly parents by using two mortgages, to which each family was entitled. 3) In the case of a single-parent family, an elderly couple, or a family in which someone is disabled or chronically ill, public rental housing is provided at a very highly subsidized rate (available mainly in the development areas in the North and South of the country). 4) During the first half of the decade, many immigrants rented mobile homes that were set up in various parts of the country. All these sites have now been closed down. Ethiopian immigrants who in the 1990s lived in mobile home sites and since then in absorption centres were eligible for an affirmative action policy. They receive extremely subsidized mortgages, where the monthly repayment is limited to $70 a month. In fact, over 90% of the mortgage is a grant. 5) Special hostels were built for the elderly and buildings rented by the government were turned into small studio apartments. Some 7,000 elderly couples and singles were able to rent such living units.

> Immigrants' successful integration in their new society is usually related not only to the absorption capacities of the host country and the new-comers' demographic and socio-economic characteristics, but also to their ideological motivation and level of commitment to the new society as well.

Geographical distribution

Immigrants who arrived in 1990-91 settled mainly in the central part of the country. The two major coastal cities, Haifa and Tel Aviv, and their surrounding areas

had a large supply of empty apartments, and the owners were only too happy to rent them to the newcomers. The government also passed a regulation freeing the landlords of having to pay income tax on the rents received.

In the past Israel has had a policy of encouraging immigrants to settle in the peripheral areas in the North and the South of the country. This policy was implemented mainly by offering immigrants government-built housing with highly subsidized rents. This policy was partially successful.

As the present wave of immigrants began moving into permanent housing, they tended to settle in the more peripheral areas where housing was cheaper and in locations where the Government offered special grants to all its citizens for the purchase of an apartment, which further cheapened the price of the housing. Starting in 1995 a reverse trend emerged where immigrants began moving back to the central areas of the country, mainly because they found better employment opportunities. At the end of 1997, nevertheless, more than 25% of FSU immigrants were living in the Southern District while initially, 13% of the 1990-1991 FSU immigrants settled in that district (compared to 14% of the total population). In the Northern District migration was much less dramatic: 13% of the 1990-1991 FSU immigrants at first settled in that District, while at the end of 1997 some 14% of all FSU immigrants resided there (compared to 17% of the total population).

The median age of FSU immigrants is 33 years. The largest age group (40%) is composed of people aged between 20 and 44. Children younger than 17 constitute over 23% of immigrants, while the proportion aged 65 and over is 12%.

Employment

At the start of the latest wave of immigration, the economy was essentially stagnant. The unemployment rate in 1989 reached 10.3%. In the last quarter of 1991, after the arrival of 375,000 immigrants within two years, unemployment among new immigrants reached 38.5% and total unemployment increased to 11.7%. Gradually, as demand for commodities, services and housing by immigrants made an impact on the economy and as a result of the immigrants' flexibility in accepting any kind of employment, unemployment levels fell drastically, and by the end of 1997, they stood at 9%. This figure increased to 10.2% in 1998, as did total unemployment (8.2%), as a result of the financial crises in the Far East, Russia and countries of Latin America. In 1998, the unemployment rate of immigrants who had arrived in 1990-91 was lower than the average in the country. In 2004, the rate of workforce participation among immigrants who arrived since 1990 and aged at least 15 years was higher than among non-immigrants (58.1% compared to 54.9%). The unemployment rate however was the same (10.4%). The unemployment rate among 1990-91 immigrants was lower in 2004 than among non-immigrants (7.8% compared to 10.4%.). Immigrants comprised 18.8% of the employed in 2004, when they reprensented 17.8% of the population aged 15 and older. On the other hand they comprised 18.9% of the unemployed.

Quite remarkably, the initial challenge of finding employment for this massive immigration was met. A further challenge, which is to secure employment similar or related to the immigrant's original profession, has only partially been fulfilled. As stated earlier, some 65% of the immigrants who were employed in the FSU held higher education degrees. However, only 70% were employed in fields that demanded higher education. The government set up a wide variety of programs with the aim of enabling as many individuals as possible within macro-economic limits to obtain training and find suitable employment. One of the most successful was the program for immigrant scientists and R & D engineers. This program, originally created in the early 1970s to help the immigrant scientists who arrived at the time from the Soviet Union, serviced the 16,000 scientists and R & D engineers who arrived since 1989. Some 80% were able to find initial employment in their fields of specialization. This program heavily subsidized the salaries of the scientist for 3 to 4 years and provided them with research funding.

Other programs included licensing, training, re-training and additional training courses of 500 to 1,000 hours in day programs and 200 to 300 hours in evening programs. The Ministry of Labor and Social Affairs runs many of these programs which are open to both veteran citizens and new immigrants, and almost all instruction is given in Hebrew. The Ministry of Immigrant Absorption runs other programs exclusively for newcomers where some of the material is transmitted in the native tongue of the immigrant. Almost 100,000 immigrants participated in these courses during the last decade.

In the late 1990s, special *ulpan* classes have been set up for students from specific professions, teaching them professional terminology in Hebrew and English. In some of these classes the students also receive a basic course in the use of computers. Due to the drop in the number of immigrants during the past years to some 23,000, these special *ulpans* were closed. Workshops are offered instructing how to prepare resumes, search for jobs and prepare for job interviews.

Another innovative program aims to encourage immigrants to be self-employed. Approximately 1,000 immigrants have used this option each year and opened businesses. They were aided by a certain number of agencies esspecially established for new immigrants, offering services for free or at nominal costs, and they are eligible for subsidized loans of up to $15,000 to help them set up a business.

These efforts enabled some 40% of immigrants, after residing in the country for five years, to find work in their former profession or a similar one. Among engineers (the largest professional group), only one-third found jobs in the profession they held abroad, or similar jobs, within this period. But one must take into account the fact that more than 120,000 engineers arrived in the country, compared to the total 28,000 engineers employed in the Israeli workforce in 1989.

Israel could boast about having one of the highest ratios of physicians to population before this wave of immigration. Nevertheless, almost half of the physician immigrants who were able to qualify for their license found jobs as physicians.

For those Ethiopian immigrants who came from rural or non-developed economies and were often lacking even an elementary formal education, special courses were provided to train them in semi-skilled and skilled manufacturing and service jobs. Very few immigrants above the age of 45 were able to integrate the workforce.

Language acquisition

Each adult immigrant is eligible to attend Hebrew acquisition class, called ulpan, for 500 hours over a five-month period (day program) or over a ten-month period (evening program). Roughly 70% of the adults take advantage of this opportunity during their first six months in the country and about one-quarter of those enrolled drop out during the program. The main reason for dropping out is that the immigrant found employment. The second reason is personal or health problems.

In order to improve the language acquisition success rate and to decrease the dropout rate, specially designed classes were formed for specific professional groups.

The Planning and Research Division of the Ministry of Immigrant Absorption carried out a follow-up survey among different cohorts of 1990-1991 FSU immigrants, which revealed that after five years in the country, approximately 55% of adults are able to converse more or less fluently in a simple conversation and 40% are more or less able to read a simple letter written in Hebrew. Also, various research projects have shown that the propensity of finding a job in one's original profession increases with a better knowledge of Hebrew.

In order to assist immigrants who were in the country for many years yet were not able to master the rudiments of the language, a new regulation was passed in 1999 to give immigrants a second opportunity to attend *ulpan*.

Cultural integration

In conjunction with the direct absorption policy, the absorption authorities encourage immigrants to retain their culture and language. From the above-mentioned follow-up survey, it was found that it is important for FSU immigrants that their children continue to speak Russian and be well versed in Russian literature.

In fact, due to the wave of immigrants from the FSU, there are more Russian language daily newspapers than there are Hebrew dailies. All are privately owned and apparently profitable. From a survey on the consumption of the media by FSU immigrants in the beginning of 1999, we learn that 65% of all adult FSU immigrants who arrived in the 1990s had read a Russian language daily at least once during the week prior to the interview. Only 33% had read a Hebrew daily during the same period.

Israeli public radio also has a station that broadcasts in Russian 16 hours per day. A reported 60% listened to this station at least one hour a day. There are also radio programs in Amharic for the Ethiopian immigrants, as well as in other languages.

All these media provide jobs for the new immigrants. In this train of thought, artistic media were also given support. Thus, theatre groups were set up as well as orchestras, ensembles, and dance and folklore groups, all of which provide jobs on one hand, and offer familiar cultural activities that the new immigrants seem to appreciate very much.

As many as 75% of FSU immigrants reported that they came to Israel out of choice, and 88% said that after being in the country for five years, they would decide again today to immigrate to Israel.

Education

New immigrant children are integrated, in most cases, directly into the educational system. They are eligible to receive one to two hours of additional instruction per week either privately or in groups. They are also able to take some of the matriculation exams in their native tongue. If they choose to take the exam in Hebrew, they receive ten additional points towards their final grade.

A program exists to encourage immigrants to pursue higher education. The program includes the establishment of preparatory courses for those unable to enter schools of higher education directly and a full tuition scholarship for three years. Some of the courses are given in Russian for the FSU immigrants and they are able to take some of the exams in Russian.

For the Ethiopian immigrants additional help is provided, as part of an affirmative action project, including a program to encourage studying for a second degree.

Over 40,000 students went through this program during the last decade. Among these students, approximately 6,000 are from Ethiopia. In 2005 over 7,000 students were in the program, 1,500 of whom were from Ethiopia.

Jewish and Israeli identity of the immigrants

Immigrants' successful integration in their new society is usually related not only to the absorption capacities of the host country and the newcomers' demographic and socio-economic characteristics, but also to their ideological motivation and level of commitment to the new society as well. Though most studies on immigration patterns show

that the "push factors" in the home country are usually the compelling factors in making a decision to leave one's home, the "pull factors" are determinant in choosing to which country one will immigrate. These findings have been proven valid for the Israeli case as well. However, the Ministry of Immigration's follow-up survey has shown that Jewishness and solidarity with the State of Israel rank highest in the hierarchy of motives to immigrate to Israel among those individuals who in fact came to Israel; this sets Israel apart from other countries. As much as 75% of FSU immigrants reported that they came to Israel by choice, and 88% said that after being in the country for five years, they would choose again today to immigrate to Israel. The motivation behind this solidarity may be one of the major factors in the relative success of the integration of this wave as well as past waves of immigrants to Israel.

Conclusion

If one takes into account the various aspects of the absorption and integration process and the limited resources of the country, we may conclude that immigrants from the FSU have done, on the whole, extremely well. There are nevertheless some groups who are not doing so well, such as the elderly living on an old-age pension from the National Insurance (most still live in private rentals). The old age pension only allows for a minimum standard of living and these immigrants, for the most part, have no other source of income. Elderly immigrants receive a subsidy of approximately $200 per month for renting an apartment but they frequently have to move. Also, those FSU immigrants who came from the Caucasian and Bukharian areas are having a harder time adaptating than those from the European areas.

Immigrants from Ethiopia, a society and economy so different from those of Israel, are having much more difficulty; despite affirmative action programs and huge funds invested to support their integration (four times as much as for a family from the FSU). However, there are already many positive signs, such as an increase in the percentage of youth passing the matriculation exams, the number of students in schools of higher education and the number of soldiers who become officers.