Come Home, Be Professional: Ethno-nationalism and Economic Rationalism in Israel’s Return Migration Strategy

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The current article examines Israel’s return migration strategy since its early days of statehood. Through a critical analysis of incentive-based programmes geared towards Israeli emigrants it argues that despite an explicitly ethno-national discourse to justify repatriation, state-sponsored initiatives have been economically motivated, targeting as such a segmented group of highly skilled emigrants. The strategy’s inherent tension between the broad appeal reflected in the ethno-national call for emigrants to return (‘Israel encourages all Israeli Jews to return home’), and the selective focus on narrowly-defined groups of emigrants based on their expected contribution to the national economy (‘Israel needs talented and highly skilled individuals’) is discussed. Focusing on the political debate around return migration from the 1950s through to the present, the essay illustrates the strategy’s constant oscillation between broad ethno-nationalism and particular (neo-liberal) economic rationalism.

Introduction

During his October 2006 tour to Israeli emigrant communities in six North American cities, Israel’s Minister of Immigrant Absorption Zeev Boim claimed, ‘When I speak about Israelis returning to Israel, it should include all Israelis, even those who spent less time in Israel or were not born in Israel or made Israel a transit country’. In the course of the exact
same tour, Nadia Prigat, Director of the Department for Returning Residents, housed in Mr. Boim’s Ministry added,

It is difficult to compete [with America]. Young, talented Israelis go abroad to upgrade themselves both academically and professionally. But that also makes them very attractive to the Israeli job market. Israel has niches, especially in hi-tech, that can offer emigrants a competitive option to living abroad.2

Both messages, delivered in front of a large and enthusiastic audience of Israeli emigrants in New York, Toronto, Boston, San Francisco, Los Angeles and Miami, are emblematic of the historical tension embedded in Israel’s return migration strategy. On the one hand, in their quest to encourage Israeli emigrants to return ‘home’, Israeli officials have long evoked a range of explicitly ethno-national arguments, focusing as they may on emigrants’ innate connection to the homeland. The highlighting of emigrants’ (essentialised) identities as Israeli Jews have been a salient feature in official efforts to (re)construct a discursive link and a sense of belonging between the homeland and all Israeli emigrants, regardless of their socio-economic class and demographic profile. Yet the broad appeal encapsulated in the ethno-national discourse deployed to encourage return migration (‘Israel is the home of all Israeli emigrants’) has frequently been followed by state-sponsored programmes that selectively targeted and, subsequently, rewarded considerably smaller segments of the emigrant population. Identified for their advanced professional skills and perceived contribution to the national economy (‘Israel needs talented and highly skilled individuals to help move its economy forward’), and often prioritised as aid-recipients in state-sponsored programmes, these groups consist primarily of young, professional and highly-educated individuals.

The current article examines the roots, motives and implications of this complex, inherently contradictory, strategy. It argues that the instrumental use of broad ethno-nationalism to encourage the return of all Israeli emigrants has been concealing an implicit neo-liberal agenda that works to promote initiatives aimed at the return of selected groups of highly skilled emigrants. While it is not suggested that return migration programmes have been created to intentionally exclude certain segments of the Israeli emigrant population or discourage them from returning to Israel, it is argued that viewing return migration instrumentally (that is, as an economic development strategy) has invariably led to the creation of public programmes that appeal to and primarily reward those whose expected contribution to the national economy was deemed the greatest (young, educated, professional emigrants) and gave rise to an historic bias
against low-skilled emigrants. Recent programmes disproportionately highlighting neo-liberal themes of private business entrepreneurship, technological innovation and economic productivity enhancement have exacerbated the situation, serving as top-down mechanisms of selection that explicitly favour a fairly small number of Israeli emigrants and strongly encourage their repatriation.

The remainder of the essay is organised as follows: the first section theoretically contextualises return migration within a broader literature on globalisation and state-produced diaspora strategies. The second part traces the historical roots of Israel's strategy vis-à-vis its emigrant population and surveys recent changes in its public policies in the light of global patterns of diaspora mobilization. It argues that discursive and structural changes alike have led to a fundamental transformation in the state's official strategy towards its emigrants. Termed 'maintain/return', the current strategy acknowledges the legitimacy of emigration and the need to maintain official ties with emigrants in order to preserve their national identity as Israelis while devising programmatic initiatives to encourage their return. The final section surveys and critically analyses state-sponsored return migration programmes in Israel since the early 1950s. Using primary materials (mostly proceedings of parliamentary committee meetings), it shows the extent to which the official trajectory to appeal to all Israeli emigrants has systematically been followed by incentive-based programmes that target highly skilled emigrants.

Diaspora, Transnational Ties and Return Migration

Return, or counter, migration was acknowledged as an integral part of every major migration wave over a century ago and has since been researched extensively at both domestic and international levels. Many studies have been concerned with the probability of economically motivated migrants returning to their developing countries of origin in the global south, their level of social reintegration into their communities of origin and subsequent contribution to local and national economic development.

With the advent of the transnational approach to migration, return migration has lost much of its traditional temporal linearity and spatial boundedness. A growing number of scholarly accounts have shown that under conditions of accelerated globalisation migration and return migration become flexible forms of cross-border mobility embedded in a web of extensive transnational personal, familial and professional ties. While ushering in the construction of home abroad, the spinning of these ever-growing transnational ties from below was theorised as
instrumental in retaining strong socio-cultural, political and economic bonds with peoples, communities, and localities left behind and, more important, accelerating the move back. As Ley and Kobayashi recently noted, ‘[F]or some migrants return migration is less a final adjustment than another stage in a continuing itinerary with further movements ahead, whether unexpected, or as we shall see, eagerly awaited’.  

The instrumentality of transnational ties and their salient role in facilitating return migration has recently been discussed by diaspora scholars. A key theme in this context has been that the growing importance of global diasporas has motivated state apparatuses to devise calculated strategies to reach out to transnational migrants and other segments of their globally dispersed ethno-national and religious communities. The guiding principle in this transnational expansion of nation states’ effective incorporation regime has been that which accentuate the multiple political and economic advantages associated with strong and loyal diasporic communities. Tapping into the resources of communities abroad as part of an overarching diaspora strategy has become an increasingly legitimate transnational practice pursued by a large number of national governments in both developing and developed countries. In addition to mobilisation strategies undertaken by sending state apparatuses, recent studies draw attention to the engagement of homeland-based political parties, non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and other non-state actors with diasporic communities.

Implied in these and other studies is the notion that in contrast to the past in which efforts to reconnect with and mobilise the skills of overseas subjects often constituted part of a return strategy, recent mechanisms of time-space compression have untied the two, culminating in systematic mobilisation efforts that do not require repatriation. As Larner recently argued,

Whereas early efforts involved encouraging highly skilled migrants to return to their home countries, today a range of new techniques are being used to engage expatriates in activities in their countries of origin without requiring them to return. This shift, it is argued, makes manifest a new emphasis on accessing global economic networks by identifying and mobilizing citizens who have multiple affiliations.

It is in this context that Smith has famously distinguished between ‘homeland policies’ which aim to encourage repatriation and ‘homeland nation policies’ designated to promote effective ties between diasporic communities and sending state, arguing that the latter has become ever more common. Others have emphasised the instrumental role of cultural ‘bonding mechanisms’ in renewing emigrants’ ‘sense of connection to the past’.
Recent efforts towards ‘mobilisation without repatriation’ are therefore no longer limited to governments in less developed countries (LDCs) of the global south seeking to boost national economies by encouraging migrants to maintain high levels of financial remittances. Rather, as a growing body of literature suggests, state apparatuses in transitioning economies (China, India and Argentina) and well-established, wealthier nation states (New Zealand, Ireland and Wales) are presently engaged in a process of identifying and mobilising diaspora-based individuals, non-governmental organisations and privately held firms as part of a broad development strategy. As de Haas recently argued, ‘Return is by no means conditional for development, migrant orientations have become increasingly transnational, and people can be simultaneously involved in several countries.’

Israeli State and Diaspora Mobilization: Towards a ‘Maintain/Return’ Strategy

In contrast to the generally warm relations between the Israeli state and the global Jewish diaspora and the strong support provided by the former at times of economic and political duress, Israeli governments have historically ignored their native emigrants and refrained from developing a cohesive policy to institutionalise relations with them. Since Israel’s raison d’être is the (re)-territorialisation of diaspora Jews by way of kibbutz galuyot (Hebrew for ‘ingathering of the exiles’), out-migration from the Jewish state has long been depicted as an act of national disloyalty and emigrants were portrayed as traitors. Describing emigrants as morally weak, root-lacking individuals whose actions are potentially destructive to the entire Zionist project, state agencies have effectively severed official ties with Israeli expatriates while simultaneously inducing an explicit anti-emigration discourse. Gold argues that four discursive measures have been used by Israeli governments to discourage emigration from the Jewish state. De-legitimising Israeli life in the diaspora, underscoring the social immorality of emigration, presenting a distorted description of Israeli life in the diaspora as lacking and culturally hollow, and deepening the schism between Israeli emigrants and local Jews were all instrumental in the institutionalisation of a negative discourse on emigration in Israel through the late 1980s.

It was not until the early 1990s, when a growing awareness developed among Israeli decision makers that expatriates remain loyal citizens even while in their new environments, that a change in the discourse on emigration took place. An emblematic, yet important manifestation of the change had been the substitution of the traditional derogatory concept...
used to refer to emigrants (Yordim, ‘those who descend’) with the more neutral ‘Israelis (residing) Abroad’. While nominal, it reflects a substantial departure from the state’s long-held approach towards emigration in general and emigrants in particular. It ought to be seen, I argue, as part of a broader process of rapprochement between the state and emigrants which continues to the present and affects policies made in Jerusalem and, consequently, governmental programmes geared towards and deployed within emigrant communities abroad. The state’s official rejection of emigration as a socially aberrant phenomenon has given way to a more lenient approach that regards emigrants as legitimate extra-territorial citizens, and, therefore an integral part of the Israeli nation. Subsequently, a transformation in state policies – including an emphasis on the need for official emissaries to proactively engage with emigrants – was unfolding and congealed into a strategy which I term maintain/return.

Two principles lie at the heart of the new strategy embarked upon by agencies of the Israeli state. The first reflects an official affirmation that emigrants are a group of citizens whose decision to move overseas is legitimate and ought to be respected by agents of the state both in and out of Israel. In contrast to the dominant historical approach that emphasised the social and moral illegitimacy of the move, advocates of the new strategy argue that state authorities should acknowledge the legitimacy of emigration and embrace emigrants as de facto Israeli citizens abroad. As Member of the Knesset and Chairman of the Parliamentary Committee on Immigrant Absorption Emanuel Zisman succinctly argued, ‘[T]he Government of Israel must treat emigrants as people who are part of the state and part of the nation’. Related to this principle is the notion that as national citizens residing overseas, Israeli emigrants are important political and economic assets on whose capacities and strengths the state ought to capitalise. It is not, therefore, the mere legitimacy of emigration and their national inclusiveness that the state and its emissaries overseas must come to terms with; rather, according to the principle mentioned above (‘maintain’), the (re)-construction of official ties with emigrants and the maintenance of their cultural identity as Israelis becomes a key task of state agents in Israel and abroad. Instrumental to the pursuit of this objective have been programmes financed and executed by the Israeli government in order to strengthen first and second generation emigrants’ Jewish and Israeli identities, including Hebrew book clubs, arts and crafts’ fairs, and celebrations of nationally significant events (for example, Independence Day, Memorial Day for the IDF Fallen). The most successful among those is undoubtedly Tzofim Tzabar, a collaboration between the state and the Israeli Scouts’ Movement which culminated in the establishment
of a dozen local troops intended to strengthen Israeli identity among 1.5
and second generation emigrants in North America.

According to the second principle that guided the new strategy, it is
incumbent upon state agencies to pursue a more proactive policy of
repatriation (‘return’). Thus, despite acknowledging the legitimacy of
emigration and recognising the need to reconnect with emigrants in order
to maintain their identity as Israeli subjects, returning emigrants to Israel
remains a key objective of the strategy. This should be achieved by setting
up and deploying a range of – primarily – economic incentives in order
to encourage emigrants’ return. While gradually abandoning the negative
stance towards emigration and attempting to reconnect with citizens
abroad to sustain their ties with the homeland (‘maintain’), state agencies
have embarked on programmatic initiatives designated to facilitate ‘the way
home’ for interested migrants (‘return’). As the next section shows,
incentive-oriented programmes have long been the most common tactic
undertaken by the Israeli state to encourage return migration.

In spite of its obvious merits, the dual strategy received much criticism
in some circles in Israel. Right-leaning politicians have often denounced
what some called ‘a post-Zionist strategy’ that not only legitimises the
emergence of an Israeli diaspora but further supports and perpetuates it.
The only governmental aid to be provided, it was argued, was that which
accelerated return migration unconditionally. Geula Cohen, a former
Member of Knesset and a long time anti-emigration activist was
supportive of the new strategy to normalise relations with emigrants in so
far as it leads to their ultimate return. She stated that,

In every embassy there should be a person that coordinates the ties with
the Jewish community and with emigrants, especially where there is a
large number of them. It should be a person that studies them,
initiate[s] activities for them. . . . There is a need to cultivate ties with
them in order to return them to Israel. [The idea is] not to make their
lives pleasant there and to help them celebrate Independence Day there,
to bring down [Lehorid] the State of Israel there, but to bring them up
[Leha’ alot] here.33

The Israeli House, a state-funded cultural centre established in a dozen
Israeli consulates and embassies abroad since the early 1990s, best
illustrates this new strategy of ‘maintain (ties abroad)/return (emigrants
home)’ promoted by Israeli governments in the course of the past two
decades. Started up by Ofra Navon, Israel’s former first lady, Israeli Houses
are transnational institutional mechanisms that work to maintain
emigrants’ cultural ties with the homeland while offering them a wide
range of services in support of their eventual return to Israel. The equal
importance attributed to both objectives is aptly described in the following excerpt taken from a governmental website,

The [Israeli House] project was established over 10 years ago under the auspices of the Department of Returning Residents in the Ministry for Immigrant Absorption and its objective is to solidify the ties between Israelis who reside abroad and the State of Israel. The Israeli House works to encourage Israelis to return to Israel. Encouraging return is done by informing to-be returnees of their legal rights and accompanying them throughout the process. This will be done without judging those who wish to continue to live abroad. They will continue to enjoy the various cultural activities aimed at maintaining their Israeli identity, the Hebrew language, and their ties to Israel.34

Return migration has therefore remained the ultimate objective of the strategy and the more important of its two principles. Pressure exerted by social activists and politicians to return ‘the best and brightest’, especially at times of economic duress, has been instrumental in convincing state agencies to craft different return migration programmes. However, a chronic lack of funding in tandem with the adoption of an economic rationalist approach that centres on emigrants’ contribution to the nation have often yielded explicitly skewed return migration programmes. With no exception, despite their preceding discourse, repatriation initiatives throughout Israel’s history have shown clear preference towards the support of highly skilled emigrants. Their comparative advantage and economic potential have been underscored by policy makers, often overshadowing their co-nationals who were quantitatively superior, yet qualitatively inferior.

The next section critically examines Israel’s return migration efforts and argues that despite their broad appeal, state-funded programmes have been strongly biased towards a fairly small group of highly skilled Israeli emigrants. Juxtaposing the ethno-national trajectory that highlights the need to return all emigrants with the programmatic rationale to focus on the more productive emigrants, the section shows the strategy’s inherent tension and illustrates its embedded imbalances. For the sake of structural clarity, the section is divided into four parts, each focusing on a distinct sub-period and its constitutive political-economic events.

Return Migration from Above: The Israeli Context

Scholarly accounts of return migration to Israel have focused primarily on the demographic profile of returnees as well as their different motives for returning.35 Others have dealt with the ‘myth of return’ entertained by emigrants and its salient role in cultivating a distinct ethno-national
identity among Israelis in North America. These studies suggest that irrespective of the length of their stay abroad, Israeli emigrants remain ‘permanent sojourners’, harbouring future plans of return to the homeland, yet constantly postponing and seldom acting upon them in a concrete manner. Despite a steady stream of returning Israeli emigrants since the early 1990s and growing publicity for public programmes created to increase their number (as reflected in the large number of articles in both the written and electronic press in Israel in both Hebrew and English), academic studies have paid relatively little attention to the role of the Israeli state in inducing return migration. Their controversial nature along with entrenched sensitivity and massive political resistance to discussing emigration-related issues has made return migration an overtly undesired topic. The rationale and, more importantly, political-economic context in which governmental initiatives were conceived and implemented remained largely unexplored and poorly understood (but see Toren and Gold). To the best of my knowledge, no studies have been produced that examine the evolution of Israel’s return migration strategy and when specific programmes have been discussed it has usually been in the context of evaluating their perceived effectiveness.

The next section surveys and critically examines key governmental initiatives to return Israeli emigrants from the early 1950s onwards. The fourfold clustering suggested (early efforts, economic expansion, economic development and selective measures) aims to facilitate the analysis of the strategy’s chronological evolution while underscoring its consistency in terms of rationale and target audience.

**Early Efforts (1948–1967)**

Despite occasional calls to refrain from contacts with Israeli emigrants and cancel their citizenship rights, the Israeli state has maintained ties with its citizens abroad since its early days. The mass departures during Israel’s first decade and exaggerated concerns of ‘the demise of the Zionist project’ notwithstanding, voices have been heard arguing for official ties with emigrants since ‘it is the state’s responsibility to take care of its citizens even if they have permanently left it’. In 1953, only five years after gaining independence, a special parliamentary sub-committee appointed to examine Jewish out-migration recommended that a three-month ‘amnesty period’ (during which the emigrants’ return would be wholly financed by the government) be given to all Israeli passport-holders living abroad. The rationale was to promote the return of those emigrants who could not afford to pay for the trip back to Israel. The proposal was rejected by the
Ministry of the Interior in light of its ‘non-economical’ nature and political concerns that all-encompassing support for repatriation could undermine official attempts to produce an anti-emigration atmosphere in Israel. More importantly, a sweeping amnesty was perceived as counter-productive to the state approach to entice only ‘quality emigrants’. A senior incumbent in the Ministry explained the refusal, noting that ‘it is the right of emigrants to return if they wish and [only] if they can afford it’. While the committee did not adopt any practical resolutions concerning return migration, it was the first official entity to consider support for repatriation and reject it on purely economic grounds. The notion that repatriation efforts ought to be guided by principles of financial rationalism rather than the state’s commitment to its citizens abroad (as many of its agents had argued) was to become a salient component of Israel’s return migration strategy.

In 1955, David Ben-Gurion, Israel’s founding father and its first prime minister, who was concerned with the emerging ‘brain drain’ had instructed the Ministry of Foreign Affairs to recruit highly skilled Israeli citizens residing abroad and negotiate their return to Israel by offering them specific incentives, including preferential treatment in accessing jobs and subsidised housing. His call for the return of all Israeli citizens living overseas was followed by an instruction to staff at the Israeli General Consulates in New York and London to search for and contact Israeli academics and scientists in order to encourage them to return to Israel. The idea was to use the consulate’s record-keeping system to identify highly skilled Israeli citizens studying and working in North American and British universities in order to convince them to consider repatriation. An entrenched anti-emigration discourse and a general sense that ties with emigrants should be severed notwithstanding, the need for highly skilled manpower during an era of massive nation-building motivated this preliminary programme. Budgetary constraints and inefficient institutional coordination mechanisms undermined the initiative and it was phased out shortly after, though it is estimated that several dozen emigrants did return as a result of this direct effort. Despite its ad hoc nature and premature demise, by underscoring the need to carefully target highly skilled and educated emigrants, the programme had paved the way for and largely determined the scope of subsequent initiatives.

The selective focus on the return of highly skilled emigrants (often referred to as ‘academically-educated’) was to become more apparent by the early 1960s. Yigal Alon, Israel’s Minister for Labor Affairs institutionalised this aim by establishing branches of the Israeli Bureau for the Academic Worker (Halishka Laoved Ha’ akademi) in New York and
London. Under the auspices of his ministry, representatives of the bureau abroad were assigned to construct and maintain ties with Israeli students and faculty in North American (mostly US-based) and British universities in order to return them to Israel. Expressing mounting concerns of growing emigration rates Minister Alon frequently used patriotic language to emphasise the need to make specific efforts to promote the return of those who were academically educated.

Scientists argue that science is their second homeland. But Israel needs them here, in their first homeland. We must create personal and national challenges for them, yet provide them with the required minimum for work and survival. It is imperative that we create opportunities for those with talent and knowledge that wish to return.47

As part of the effort to reverse the unfolding brain drain, the Ministry commissioned a comparative report on Israeli, Japanese, and Indian students abroad, their motives, and the effects of their decision to emigrate, on the economies of their nations.48 The report commended the Israeli government for its concentrated efforts to secure the return of academically educated emigrants and recommended that the cost of future policies not be greater than the benefits projected.49 Subjecting repatriation policies to economic rationale dictated that efforts be made to identify those predicted to have the highest return following their repatriation, namely graduating students and highly skilled professionals in general, and tailor specific programmes for them. Numerous parliamentary discussions had taken place in the 1960s that focused on measures to return Israeli students and other academically educated emigrants.50 Subsequently, a set of incentives was put together for them, which included among other things discount airfares to travel and meet with potential employers in Israeli academia and industry and financial support in organising professional workshops to meet with fellow Israeli scientists visiting abroad.51

It is in the context of these pioneer efforts that Israel’s approach towards return migration was developed. The early segmentation of emigrants based on economic considerations paved the way for decades of distortions in the allocation and disbursement of funds associated with programmes geared towards returning emigrants. Despite an official ethno-national trajectory that centred on the need to appeal to and return all emigrants in the name of their strong Israeli identity and innate ties to the territorial nation state, creating mechanisms of selective allocation of governmental aid based on emigrants’ socio-economic class (and other demographic attributes) and their prospective contribution to the national economy,
resulted in a fundamentally biased structure of repatriation support in Israel. While trying to attract the ‘best and brightest’ is not an entirely new phenomenon, nor has it been unique to Israel, as recent programmes to mobilise migrants with sought-after skills (for example, the United Kingdom’s 2006 Highly Skilled Migrant Programme) demonstrate, it is the tension between discourse and practice that this article focuses on and wishes to highlight. The discursive commitment to returning Israeli emigrants regardless of their demographic profile, I argue, has been repeatedly suspended in the face of economic principles of financial soundness, productivity and expected return.

Return Migration, Economic Expansion and National Development (1967–82)

The gap between the lofty rhetoric concerning governmental interest in the return of all emigrants, regardless of their economic class and professional training, and the gradual zeroing in on return migration programmes for specific, highly skilled professionals, has widened considerably in the aftermath of the 1967 war. The swift military victory and the booming economy in subsequent years accelerated processes of structural economic changes in the Israeli market. The construction frenzy in the recently occupied territories (mostly the West Bank and the Gaza Strip) in tandem with the overwhelming supply of cheap Palestinian labour offered lucrative economic opportunities for Israeli employers and led to an increasing demand for Israeli white-collar professionals. In this quest for highly skilled labour, strong pressure was exerted on the government by industrialists and other economic stakeholders. Two measures taken shortly after the war were particularly important in the context of return migration; first, the Israeli Bureau for the Academic Worker expanded its reach to work more closely with students abroad and provide them with a broader set of services, including, for example, reduced interest loans for housing in Israel following their return. Minister Alon who initiated the programme noted,

[S]trengthening emigrants’ ties to Israel [is important] . . . but it is no less important to intensify [the] care of academics, including [providing] information on vacant positions, assistance in funding their trip [back to Israel] and [the] purchase of [an] apartment, and [to] take care of their absorption, in both [a] social and professional manner.53

More importantly, the need for highly skilled labour partially prompted the first ever national plan (1968) to facilitate repatriation by providing a set of benefits for all returnees. Conceived shortly before Israel’s 20th Independence Day and spearheaded by the newly-created Ministry
of Immigration and Absorption, the programme effectively equated the social and economic benefits provided for returning emigrants to those traditionally entitled only to *Olim Chadashim* (Hebrew for ‘new Jewish in-migrants’). Special assistance in housing, employment and education was granted only to citizens who left Israel between July 1952 and April 1964 who were opting to return between April 1968 and December 1970. Thus, the programme opened a limited-time window of opportunities for emigrants who have lived abroad for a minimum of four years.

An evaluation of the much-debated programme, which some argued was biased against those who never emigrated, revealed that it failed to achieve the desired outcome. No marked changes were found in the rate of return migration during its special benefit period. Some have attributed its failure to the poor advertisement campaign launched among Israeli emigrant communities abroad (particularly in the USA), prior to its implementation. Elitzur, for example, reports that over half (55 per cent) of his interviewees – all of whom resided in the USA when the benefits were introduced – were either not aware or knew very little about them. He also notes that offering economic benefits may not have been the best strategy to stir return migration, and suggests instead that concentrated efforts be made to strengthen Israeli emigrants’ sense of belonging to the land and the nation. Similarly, Toren reports significant differences in motives of emigrants associated with their occupational status, so, for example, the decision to return by the better educated and occupationally higher ranking emigrants was motivated more by the prospects of professional advancements in the country of origin, whereas lower status re-emigrant is ‘motivated mainly by patriotic attachment and loyalty to his home country and is more inclined to perceive of his homecoming as the end of his journey’. In light of these findings, it is safe to assume that despite its intended broad appeal, the programme’s primary focus on material incentives and the advertisement campaign that emphasised opportunities of professional advancement in Israel served as a selection mechanism among Israeli emigrants. Appealing more to occupationally higher ranking emigrants, incentive-based programmes yielded an inadvertent bias against the low skilled or at least failed to address their unique needs and motives to return. This general tendency is further supported by Cohen and Haberfeld who found that highly educated Israeli emigrants in the USA tend to return to Israel at substantially higher rates than those with few skills.

Despite research showing that economic benefits were among the least important factors in Israeli emigrants’ decisions to return, decision makers remained firm in their stance that the best way to attract emigrants was by putting together incentive-based programmes tailored primarily to the
needs of (highly skilled) emigrants. In 1977, in anticipation of the state’s 30th anniversary, a governmental decision was made to launch a special scheme to encourage return migration. Similarly to previous efforts, it set out to provide economic incentives to emigrants returning in the course of the designated ‘window of opportunities’. It came about following a realization that – in the aftermath of the 1968 programme (which was phased out in late 1970) – returning students and medical interns were the only groups who were entitled to governmental support upon their return.58

In its initial form, the programme received much criticism due to the ‘excessive benefits offered to emigrants at the expense of Israeli citizens who never left.’59 It was therefore scaled back and, in order to secure a more positive public outlook, its advertisement campaign was reoriented to highlight the expected contribution of aid-recipients to the Israeli economy. State officials who sought to present the target audience as composed of productive, educated individuals – rather than a needy group of emigrants who return to Israel because they did not ‘make it’ overseas – whose return ought to be publicly subsidised, constructed a discursive link between returnees and national development, highlighting their importance to broadly conceived economic interests like settlement in peripheral regions and advanced scientific research. The desired support, it was argued, was not to accrue to all who wished to return but only to eligible individuals who met a strict set of criteria. One of the suggestions made was to grant benefits to a small number of institutions (universities, research institutes and municipalities in peripheral zones) for the recruitment of a limited number of highly skilled returnees. A critique of the programme’s embedded elitism came from those who questioned whether providing benefits only to returnees with certain professional skills did not amount to ‘discrimination between one returnee and another based on his professional profile’.60

In order to disentangle the perceived connection between aid entitlements and emigrants’ level of education and professional skills, an additional clause was added, stipulating that returnees agreeing to settle in the periphery and engage in projects of national interest would receive priority over others. Minister of Immigration & Absorption David Levy summed up the new format as follows ‘We explained to them [Israeli emigrants] the issue of [economic] development, the shortage in highly skilled labor we experience in development [peripheral] towns and that – once they return – they could integrate in those [national] projects’.61 Similarly, Member of Knesset Yitzhak Rom pushed the government
to provide benefits only to those qualified individuals who commit to participating in specific development projects thus:

The way to go about that [returning emigrants] is by developing special projects or industrial zones, special industries, adequate [research] institutes, regional development [projects], regional plans. [We can consider] nuclear power plant, Mediterranean-Dead Sea canal, settlement in the Golan Heights or the Sinai [Peninsula] or other regions in the Galilee and the Negev regions. [To mobilise people] for such development programs we could make advertisement abroad, to let [people] know that in these programs we want to absorb such and such people with special [professional] skills and then absorb only those people.62

Preceded by an explicit ethno-national discourse which centred on the need to ‘bring the boys back home’, the 1977 programme – like others that followed – soon became an initiative that targeted the stronger, more professionally qualified individuals among the Israeli emigrant population. Even the preference to be given to returnees who were committed to settling in the periphery was hardly meaningful, as most development projects undertaken in those areas were based on high skilled labour (for example, engineers, life and natural scientists). Linking aid to projects of national development, therefore, did little to change the inherent bias towards returning professionals. Supported by academic research, exaggerated concerns about the brain drain motivated state agencies to seek ever more creative solutions to target ‘quality emigrants’.

Return Migration and Economic Recovery (1982–92)

The 1980s witnessed a significant surge in the number and scope of state-sponsored programmes. The exponential increase in the number of Israeli emigrants during the first half of the decade prompted the government to think more creatively of repatriation initiatives.63 As Israel’s economy was spiralling into its worst ever stagflation and global markets were gradually opening up, governmental agencies were searching for diverse ways to return tens of thousands of Israeli citizens who were residing overseas. In August 1981, Prime Minister Menachem Begin’s second government was the first ever in Israel to declare return migration a matter of national interest.64 A few months later, Member of Knesset Dov Shilanski was appointed Deputy Minister in the Prime Minister’s office and entrusted with a newly formed emigration portfolio. The increasing interest taken by politicians, social activists and journalists in emigration-related issues had not gone unnoticed by government officials who vowed
to take a decidedly proactive approach towards returning Israelis home. Mobilising the familiar ethno-national argument to rationalise return migration efforts, Deputy Minister Shilanski declared, ‘Returning Emigrants, our children, is a key role of this government. We have to return our boys who served in the military, who took part in establishing the state. I want to return them all. 65

This emphatic zeal concerning the repatriation of every Israeli citizen soon evaporated as the Ministry’s limited resources proved a significant obstacle. As in the past, officials had to scale back the Deputy Minister’s grandiose plan and focus on a narrower segment of the emigrant population whose superior educational skills were seen critical to stimulating Israel’s ailing economic market and reviving its nascent high-technology industry. As Yossi Kouchick, Director of the new Department for Returning Residents in the Ministry of Immigrant Absorption openly declared,

Most of our activity today in returning Israelis is in regards to the knowledge-intensive industry. This industry is in a very bad situation at the moment because of [a] tremendous shortage in suitable human resources, and these Israeli human resources are available outside of the country … we’re short on pharmacists, engineers, human resource personnel, nurses, teachers, and more. 66

Stopping the brain drain and returning the highly skilled and the more economically productive were becoming key objectives of Israel’s return migration strategy as of the mid-1980s. Underscoring the importance of highly educated, productive middle-class citizens to the national economy, governments in Israel unleashed an openly neo-liberal campaign to promote the return of ‘quality emigrants’, often at the expense of other, low skilled emigrants. It is interesting to note that the provision of support to returning emigrants was not legally institutionalised; instead, deciding whether emigrants were entitled to receive governmental aid was in the hands of a largely technocratic, inter-agency committee composed of representatives of the Ministries of Labor, Immigration and Housing Affairs. This institutional arrangement tightened the bureaucratic grip over decisions pertaining to return migration and exposed the fragile nature of the decision-making process that was dominated exclusively by state agents. Not surprisingly, it was during this period that the ethno-national rationale, once used extensively to appeal to Israeli emigrants regardless of their professional training, was gradually replaced by a powerful neo-liberal economic rationale. The latter stipulated that return migration programmes – being few and far between – ought to target primarily those emigrants whose skills were necessary to salvaging the
ailing economic market. The argument was that from a purely economic standpoint it was rational to invest only in highly skilled emigrants as their economic return would offset the high costs associated with the benefits rendered by the government. In contrast to the implicitly selective nature that characterised earlier periods, state bureaucrats preached carefully crafted return programmes to bring about an economic, and not merely a demographic change. For the first time in Israel’s history, returning emigrants were portrayed as important assets whose contribution to the nation ought to be measured economically, that is, based on their expected contribution to projects promoted by the state. Explaining why return migration must be centrally planned by state agencies, a leading advocate elaborated on the new approach,

We are talking about people that we need desperately in Israel, especially engineers and scientists. I need not explain to you that one good idea by an engineer could possibly change an entire production line ... which could change substantially the entire balance of payments of the State of Israel ... It should be clear, though, that we have to prioritize people who we have the need for, according to the need of the market. If tomorrow, for example, the need will arise for people in the area of chip processing, then we need to work among Israeli emigrants in the US that are experts in this area. The principle should be that it [return migration] must be in accordance with the need of the market and the economy in Israel.67

When asked whether in the name of national economic interests Israel should opt to return low-skilled emigrants, he noted, 'If the need arises for mechanics, we could think of [returning] car mechanics as well, but the truth is that I would prefer to re-train somebody who is already in Israel for that'.68

The explicitly discriminatory trajectory signalled a new phase in the state's strategy and subjected, for the first time, the quantitative (how many returnees) to the qualitative (what kind of returnees) consideration in return migration programmes. No longer concealed behind a broad appeal to all emigrants, the programmes produced during this period constitute a transformation towards an economically rationalist strategy which dictates clear criteria in determining what type of emigrants are worthy of public support. Addressing only certain groups of Israeli emigrants became a legitimate tactic in promoting a selective process of repatriation that draws its legitimacy from the emergency situation of the Israeli market. Yet as the next section shows, this selective process continued unabated throughout the 1990s, even as Israel was enjoying considerable economic growth.
prompted, partly and ironically, by the absorption of hundreds of thousands of highly skilled Jewish immigrants from the collapsing Soviet Union.

Towards Selective Measures of Return Migration: The 1990s and Beyond

Return migration programmes since the early 1990s have been developed along the same lines that characterised previous initiatives. Drawing from neo-liberal theories, state-sanctioned initiatives to return Israeli emigrants have been emphasizing elements pertaining to their economic productivity, entrepreneurial skills and added value to highly specialised market niches. Despite massive immigration waves from the republics of the former Soviet Union, a booming high-technology industry and a chronic shortage of skilled labour and capital motivated Israeli officials to broaden their search overseas. In contrast to the past, repatriation campaigns in the 1990s were not ad hoc nor were they limited in duration. Instead, a series of continuous initiatives were designed in order to appeal to different groups of emigrants and entice them to return. A prime example was a series of mass job fairs organised by the government, attended by representatives of Israeli high-technology firms, and designated to help emigrants find employment opportunities prior to returning to Israel. Thousands of Israeli emigrants in fields ranging from biotechnology to computer programming had participated in fairs taking places in various North American cities.

In 1998, a proposal to provide assistance to emigrants who returned during the state’s 50th anniversary was tabled at the parliament. The proposal to provide a standing loan (which would turn into a grant within a year from the date of arrival) to emigrants returning during the designated period evoked strong resistance. Interestingly, the draft law submitted stipulated that loans be awarded only to emigrants who could prove strong economic need. Nadia Prigat of the Department for Returning Residents noted that the intention was to give preferential treatment to emigrants in crisis, like single mothers who could not afford to purchase a home in Israel. For the first time in the history of the state, an effort was made to create a public assistance programme that would encourage the return of needy, primarily low skilled emigrants. Yet the draft submitted to the parliament induced strong reactions from politicians who insisted that, like previous initiatives, it ought to promote the return of stronger groups from among the emigrant population. Concerns were expressed that promoting the return of the needy not only constituted a strategic error as it failed to address highly skilled emigrants, but also placed an unnecessary
burden on the shoulders of the state’s social services. Member of Knesset Yitzhak Cohen, for instance, rationalised his objection as follows,

[It seems as if] the intention [of the programme] is to return home in-need population and not population that would contribute to society in Israel, population that would be a burden on our shoulders . . . [And]
I would like it to help Israelis who live in Silicon Valley; I want to help them to return.70

Others expressed similar concerns, suggesting that instead of casting a wide net, the initiative ought to advance a ‘preferential treatment’ to certain professions.71 No one disputed the need to return as many Israelis as possible, yet the limited budget dictated a focused assistance to scientists and other highly skilled returnees.

By the end of the 1990s and more forcefully since 2000, the segmentation of emigrants has become a key component of Israel’s return migration strategy. Designated programmes were created to target students, scientists, artists, athletes, businesspeople and other groups of emigrants with high levels of cultural and economic capital.

A recent report commissioned by the Ministry of Immigrant Absorption supports strategic segmentation and recommends that specific aid programmes be crafted to target highly skilled Israelis abroad. Splitting returning emigrants according to their motives, namely instrumental (mostly highly skilled, highly educated and secular males) and social and family-related (mostly women and non-academically educated), the report suggests that appealing to these groups and convincing them to return ought to be done differently. The former group, it argues, needs to be offered tangible assistance (for example, in finding suitable employment opportunities), whereas for the latter it is sufficient to highlight the socio-familial advantages associated with ‘returning home’ (for example, being close to one’s social network). The report further recommends that the clustering of emigrants be based on their socio-demographic profile which required different themes to be highlighted in addressing each of the groups. Thus, ‘In order to draw Israelis to return, the instrumental reason [to return] must be highlighted when targeting young, secular, highly-educated emigrants for whom educational, employment, and professional advancement opportunities should be offered.’72

In line with the aforementioned principle of segmentation, for example, the Ministry for Immigrant Absorption and ISMEA (Israel Small and Medium Enterprise Authority) established a new fund to assist returning business entrepreneurs. A free-of-charge network of business
advisers was made available to returning emigrants who expressed interest in setting up small businesses in Israel upon their return. Other initiatives include Klita Bamada (‘absorption by science’), a programme offering generous financial assistance to returning research students and faculty, and Omanim Chozrim, an incentive-based project to identify, assist and return exceptionally talented Israeli artists residing abroad.

Conclusions

This article deals with Israel’s return migration strategy, focusing primarily on incentive-based programmes conceived by Israeli governments to encourage repatriation. The main argument has been that despite a political discourse emphasising the state’s commitment to returning all Israeli emigrants by virtue of their ethno-national identity as Israeli Jews, governmental aid programmes have primarily targeted highly skilled emigrants. From the early days of statehood in which the return of academically educated emigrants was viewed as a legitimate nation-building strategy, to recent practices of emigrant segmentation based on profession, incentive-based return initiatives have been structurally biased towards professionals. While not wishing to discourage the return of low skilled emigrants intentionally, state-funded programmes effectively promoted the return of emigrants whose expected contribution to the national economy was predicted to be the highest. Highly skilled and educated emigrants, and more recently professionals with high level of cultural capital (for example, artists, athletes), have all been identified at various times as ‘quality emigrants’ whose return to the homeland ought to be facilitated – through economic and other incentives – by state agencies.

By now widely acknowledged and supported by a large body of literature, the mobilisation of highly skilled emigrants by their countries of origin has become an integral part of an all-encompassing diaspora strategy. The ‘race for talent’ compelled many governments to try and offset the costs associated with the brain drain by capitalising on the strengths of members of their diasporic communities. An overt ethno-national discourse has often accompanied these tactics, serving as a cultural bonding mechanism, enhancing expatriates’ sense of belonging and underscoring their visceral ties to the territorial nation state. Despite considerable similarities, the Israeli strategy differs in that it uses an ethno-national discourse not simply to recruit highly skilled emigrants as members of a ‘scientific diaspora’, but rather as a means to return them to the homeland. Discursive formulations that draw on the solid bond...
between Israelis and their (former) country have been instrumental to official efforts of repatriation.

Yet as I have argued throughout this article, Israel’s return migration strategy and, more specifically, the programmatic initiatives that were set up as part of it, rarely followed a broad, ethno-national rationale; rather, as my analysis of programmes since the early 1950s illustrates, they have regularly abided by a principle of economic rationalism, principally intended to maximise the rate of return on public investment. Agents of the Israeli polity economicus advanced an official approach that conceives of repatriation programmes as a means to select the most professionally qualified from among the emigrant population. The notion that highly skilled emigrants can be returned more easily through economic benefits, or as one senior incumbent in the Ministry of Immigrant Absorption recently put it in a personal interview ‘we don’t discriminate against anybody, but highly skilled emigrants simply have more to offer us’, has dominated Israeli return migration policy and practice for decades. More importantly, the dominance of economic rationalism rendered incipient initiatives to target low skilled and economically disadvantaged emigrants inefficient and undermined virtually every one of those initiatives. The ‘Jerusalem Consensus’ concerning the need to return Israeli emigrants actively by any means necessary succumbed once and again to a neo-liberal thinking that prioritises economic return over mass return.

Postscript

Segmentation and selective programmes remain a key principle of Israel’s strategy as it embarks on ‘Returning Home at Sixty’ (Chozrim Habayta Beshishim), its largest ever repatriation programme organised as part of the state’s 60th anniversary celebrations. A user-friendly website informs Israeli emigrants of the different incentives offered by the government to those who return in the course of the anniversary year. A personal electronic postcard by the Minister of Immigrant Absorption awaits those who enter the website and pleads with them to return to Israel, ‘your home, the place to raise and educate your children, to put down roots, to grow and build the state of Israel’. Further down on the same page, a visible link invites researchers and scientists to explore the ‘special programme to the return of brains’ (Machzirim et Hamochot Habayta). The short description below reads

we [in the Ministry for Immigrant Absorption] are not naïve enough to think that a decision to return to Israel and leave behind a job that
is interesting and lucrative could be made simply on emotional grounds of longing and the need to belong. In our individualistic and materialist era, one needs to be employed as well.77

Belonging and having a job, it seems, is something Israel can only offer to some of its repatriates.

Notes

[22] Kuznetsov, Diaspora Networks; Lowell and Gerova, Diasporas and Economic Development; and Smart and Hsu, ‘The Chinese Diaspora’.
Sheffer, *Modern Diasporas*; and Sheffer, ‘Israeli-Diaspora Relations’.

Shokeid, *Children of Circumstances*; and Sobel, *Migrants from the Promised Land*.

Gold, *The Israeli Diaspora*.

Cohen, ‘From Overt Rejection’.

Gold, ‘Israeli Emigration Policy’.

Cohen, ‘From Overt Rejection’.

Har-Even, ‘Emigration as a Social Problem’.


Proceedings, Immigration and Absorption, February 20, 1989, 17; emphasis added.


Cohen and Gold, ‘Constructing Ethnicity’; and Gold, *The Israeli Diaspora*.

Urieli, ‘Rhetorical Ethnicity of Permanent Sojourners’.


Fein, ‘The Re-Acclimation of Returning Israelis’.

It is estimated that an excess of 100,000 Israeli Jews left the country during the state’s first decade of independence (1948–58).


A. Michaeli, Proceedings, Immigration and Absorption, March 12, 1985, 2.

Ibid.


Ritterband, ‘The Non-Returning Israeli Student’; and Ritterband, ‘The Determinants of Motives of Israeli Students’.


Giladi, ‘Israeli Economy’.

‘Ways to Encourage Young Academics and Prevent Their Settlement Abroad’, Knesset Proceedings, August 3, 1968, 2376.

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