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ISRAEL AS A NON-ARAB STATE: THE POLITICAL IMPLICATIONS OF MASS IMMIGRATION OF NON-JEWS

Ian S. Lustick

Hundreds of thousands of the immigrants from the former Soviet Union who have arrived in Israel between 1989 and the present are not Jewish, yet they legally gain Israeli citizenship under the Law of Return. The flow of so many non-Jewish, non-Arabs into the "Jewish" state greatly complicates the demographic, cultural, statistical, and political landscape. This article explains the legal, bureaucratic, and political conditions which have sustained this immigration and suggests some of its long-term implications for the political identity of the country.

Cognoscenti have always known that the *'aliyah* (wave of immigration) from the former Soviet Union (FSU) has contained significant numbers of non-Jews. Despite official reluctance to discuss the matter publicly, this knowledge has gradually spread through Israeli society. It is now clear that a very large proportion of these immigrants are not Jewish, and this by virtually anyone's definition of "who is a Jew." With more than three quarters of a million immigrants having arrived from the FSU between 1989 and the end of 1998, the status of these non-Jewish immigrant citizens has become more than a weird and whispered fact or an ironic twist of fate. It has become a sociological feature

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of Israeli life, a political problem, a statistician's nightmare, and the latest vehicle for exploring the changing and fragile meaning of Israel as "a Jewish state."

This article will try to establish what is known about this issue.[1] It begins with a discussion of the question of numbers—how many people are there in Israel in this category (citizens who arrived as immigrants under the Law of Return,[2] mostly from the FSU, but who are not recognized as Jewish). It then moves to a brief explanation of the legal, bureaucratic, and political conditions that produced this phenomenon and are sustaining it. It concludes with suggestions about the long term implications of Israel's transformation from a state clearly divided between a Jewish majority and an Arab minority into a country where identity categories are multiple, blurred, and uncertain, and whose "Jewish" majority is more accurately and meaningfully regarded as "non-Arab."

HOW MANY NON-JEWS AMONG THE FSU IMMIGRANTS?

In 1990, then Interior Minister Rabbi Aryeh De'eri and Immigration and Absorption Minister Rabbi Yitzhak Peretz (both from the mainly Oriental Jewish and ultra-Orthodox Shas Party) caused a brief flurry by breaking the taboo against public discussion of the Jewish or non-Jewish identity of the immigrants from the former Soviet Union. De'eri told his staff at the interior ministry that 30 percent of the immigrants arriving in Israel were not Jewish. Peretz, appearing before the Immigration and Absorption Committee of the Knesset, warned that of the seven million people eligible to immigrate into Israel under the Law of Return, only two million were Jews.[3] Discussion of the reports by De'eri and Peretz lasted only a day or two, and focused mostly on the bad judgment reflected in mentioning such matters in public. The debate was reignited four months later following more remarks by Peretz, including estimates that as many as 40 percent of FSU immigrants were gentiles, and a proposal for changing the Law of Return to reduce the number of gentile immigrants. For reasons noted below, however, Peretz's proposal attracted little support and triggered expressions of outrage from across the political spectrum.[4]

Indeed, despite the voluminous data produced by government ministries and various Israeli think tanks on socio-economic characteristics of the new immigrant population, their housing patterns and preferences, and their political opinions, virtually nothing is reported in these studies about the proportion that is or is not Jewish. Therefore little in the way of systematic data is available. But by collecting the public statements made by informed activists and politicians, drawing on published interviews with Jewish Agency officials directly responsible, in various regions of the FSU, for mobilizing and vetting immigrants, making prudent inferences from Central Bureau of Statistics (CBS) and other

1. Indeed, I have been able to find no published scholarship on this subject, but would be delighted to be informed that it exists.

2. For the text of the Law of Return, see the Israeli Ministry of Foreign Affairs website at www.Israel-mfa.gov.il.

3. *Ha'aretz* (Tel Aviv), 22 and 24 July 1990.

4. Jonathan Karp, "Minister Sparks Row by Asking to Curb Soviet Influx to Israel," Reuters, 11 November 1990; *Jerusalem Post* (Jerusalem), 29 November 1990.

official data, and assisted by a few demographers who have made some observations on the question, it is possible to gauge the magnitude of the non-Jewish immigrant population and to document the trend toward large proportions of non-Jews among the arrivals from the FSU in recent years.

The official estimate of the interior ministry in 1991 was that five percent of the new immigrants were non-Jews. This is the lowest such estimate found. A similarly low estimate was given to me in 1998 interviews with demographers from the Central Bureau of Statistics, who indicated that according to the records of the interior ministry, 65,000 immigrants from the FSU either declared themselves Christians, were citizens whose applications for registering their religion were pending, or reported that they had "no religion." This would represent an estimate for the proportion of non-Jewish FSU immigrants of only eight percent.[5] These figures do not include non-Jews actually registered as Jews. Even using this very conservative estimate of non-Jews among the FSU immigrants, however, it was pointed out by Hebrew University demographer Sergio Della Pergola that from October 1989 to the end of 1990, 5.4 percent of FSU immigrants were registered as not Jewish. This figure rose to 13.3 percent in 1991 and 20.5 percent in 1992.[6]

Beginning in the early 1990s, public estimates of large numbers of non-Jews among the FSU immigrants began appearing. These reports came from religious and secular Jews, from "hawks" as well as from "doves." After taking over as minister of absorption in the Rabin government, the left-wing, dovish Mapam Party leader Yair Tzaban reported in 1992 that "most Russian and Ethiopian immigrants are unable to prove that they are Jewish."[7] Quoting unnamed Jewish Agency sources, the left-leaning journalist Yaron London reported in 1992 that at least 30 percent of the Russian immigrants, and perhaps as many as 60 percent of the Argentine and Romanian immigrants were non-Jews.[8] In May 1997, Lt. Col. Aharon Magdalovitz, officer of conversions in the Israel Defense Forces (IDF), reported to the Knesset's Immigration and Absorption Committee that in 1993, 30 percent of all immigrant soldiers were not Jewish.[9] Rabbi Avraham Ravitz, of the ultra-Orthodox Degel HaTorah Party, said in 1994 that the new wave of immigrants contained "hundreds of thousands of gentiles."[10] In 1995, former Speaker of the Knesset Dov Shilansky, known for his hard-line right-wing positions, estimated that 40–50 percent

5. According to my informants, the Central Bureau of Statistics itself has no official view on the matter, and acts purely as a "consumer" of information (from the population registry of the interior ministry) rather than as a producer. The practice of leaving the identity of many immigrants officially "unregistered" or "under investigation" or "application pending" is to avoid having to document the presence of large proportions of non-Jews among the immigrants and also is based on the belief that high percentages of the non-Jews among the unregistered immigrants will emigrate. According to my informants, there is some evidence to support this belief, though I have not seen it.

6. Israel Landres, "'Olim Lo Yehudim" ("Non-Jewish 'Olim"), *HaDoar* (New York), 23 August 1993, p. 6. The total figure of registered non-Jews among FSU immigrants who arrived between 1981 and 1992 provided by Della Pergola was 40,000 out of 385,000, equalling a bit more than 10 percent.

7. Yair Tzaban, *Yediot Aharonot* (Tel Aviv), 28 August 1992.

8. Yaron London, *Yediot Aharonot*, 22 July 1990.

9. Report broadcast on the independent radio station, Arutz Sheva, 28 May 1997.

10. *Washington Report on Middle East Affairs*, 10 September 1994, p. 22.

of the FSU immigrants were not Jewish.[11] Rabbi Uri Regev, of the Reform Judaism affiliated Religious Action Center in Israel, was quoted in 1996 as estimating the number of non-Jews among the immigrants from the FSU as "at least 150,000" or as "200,000." Motti Inbari, spokesman for the Russian immigrant party Yisrael Ba'Aliyah, commenting on the problem of conversion, said that approximately 150,000 of the FSU immigrants were "not halachically Jewish" (i.e., born of a mother whose mother was Jewish).[12]

In November of 1997, Finance Minister Ya'acov Ne'eman, who was in charge of the committee seeking a solution to the conversion controversy, asserted that 200,000 of the immigrants from the FSU were not Jewish.[13] According to Rabbi Yisrael Rosen, head of the "Conversion Authority" at the Chief Rabbinate, "up to 300,000 [approximately 40 percent] of recent arrivals from the former Soviet Union may be gentiles." Of these, he indicated that only 5,000 had been converted.[14] In 1997 the West Bank and Gaza Strip settler journal *Nekuda* published a lengthy discussion of the conversion problem posed by what was estimated to be an influx of "perhaps two hundred thousand gentiles" into Israel as part of the immigration from the FSU.[15]

It seems very clear that the trend Della Pergola described at the beginning of the huge influx of FSU immigrants, of rising proportions of non-Jews, has continued. Indeed, there is good evidence that the proportion of non-Jews among arriving FSU immigrants has increased significantly in recent years. By far the most detailed examination of this issue, and of evidence regarding the non-Jewish identity of large numbers of FSU immigrants, was published in the *Ha'aretz* newspaper in August 1997.[16] Based on extended interviews with Jewish Agency officials and others responsible for generating and facilitating immigration, the author of this report, Yossi Bar-Mocha, demonstrated how few of those eligible to emigrate to Israel from the FSU are actually Jewish. The report quotes a Hebrew University demographer, Mark Toltz, as saying that in 1995 only 39 percent of those eligible to emigrate to Israel from the entire FSU were Jewish and that in all of the Russian Federation in 1995, only 1,100 children were born who were halachichally Jewish. Bar-Mocha then travelled to the FSU to discover what the situation was in 1997. Quoting named officials in the Jewish Agency and the Ministry of Immigration and Absorption who had been working for years in residence in different cities and regions of the FSU, Bar-Mocha shows that the best estimates of those in the best position to know, and with the least incentive to admit how small a proportion of the immigrants they "produce" are actually Jewish, report that in St. Petersburg only 30–35 percent of those eligible to emigrate to Israel under the Law of Return are Jewish, in Moscow, fewer than

11. *Jerusalem Report*, 26 January 1995.
12. David Makovsky, *The Jerusalem Post*, 31 October 1996. The *halacha* is the code of Jewish law.
13. *Israel Shelanu* (New York), 19 November 1997.
14. Reported by the *Jerusalem Report*, 25 December 1997.
15. Moshe Stern, "L'dchot O L'karev?" ("To Reject or Bring Near?"), *Nekuda*, no. 205 (May 1997), pp. 38–42.
16. Yossi Bar-Mocha, "One of Every Three: The Appearance of the Sixteenth Tribe," *Ha'aretz*, supplement, 8 August 1997, pp. 12–15. Remarkably, in subsequent issues of the *Ha'aretz* supplement, I could find no letters to the editor or counter-articles objecting to the veracity of the evidence or interpretations offered by Bar-Mocha.

one third, in Baku, 50 percent, in the Black Sea region, 33 percent, in the Ukraine, 25 percent. All admit that the proportion of emigrants to Israel who are Jewish is only slightly higher than the proportion in the pool of those eligible to do so—largely because such a large proportion of those in the pool who are actual Jews are over age 55 and less inclined to uproot themselves. Shachar Yoval, working with Moscow students to facilitate emigration to Israel, estimated that in the entire Russian Federation there were no more than "between 175,000 and 200,000 Jews according to the Halacha."[17]

According to official figures published in Bar-Mocha's report, the proportion of non-Jewish immigrants from the FSU arriving in Israel and attaining citizenship rose from 10 percent in 1989 to 33 percent in 1994. After 1994, the figures were no longer published. But "off the record," an interior ministry official told the journalist that the figures were available, though he would not provide them. He was willing only to say that the number of non-Jews was "more than fifty percent." Such observations gain support from a poll taken among FSU immigrants as early as 1991 that showed, even in the first years of this wave of immigration, that only one out of ten of the immigrants had ever heard of a *seder* (Passover celebration).[18]

According to figures contained in the annual report of the immigrant absorption ministry for 1996, 42 percent of those admitted to Israel from the FSU as citizens under the Law of Return during 1996 were not able to be registered as Jews. For immigrants under the age of 50, this figure was 49 percent.[19] The CBS reported that in the calendar year of 1997, there was an increase of 91,000 in the country's Jewish population. The CBS also reported that 60 percent of this increase, representing 54,600, was from natural growth. By subtracting, we can see that, according to CBS figures, a positive migration balance (subtracting Jewish emigrants from Jewish immigrants) in 1997 was 36,400. The total number of immigrants arriving in 1997 was 66,500, including 57,855 from the FSU. Depending on our assumptions about the number of Jewish emigrants from Israel in 1997 and the proportion of immigrants from countries other than the FSU who were not Jewish, these CBS figures suggest that anywhere from 35 percent to 52 percent of the FSU immigrants were not Jewish.[20] Similar estimates can be made using the data reported by the CBS indicating that a positive migration balance accounted for an increase of 20,302 in the number of Christians and Israelis whose religion was not classified. Without knowing the emigration rate of these Christians and religiously unclassified immigrants, it is impossible to tell precisely how many 1997 immigrants this figure reflects, but it suggests that at least 35–45 percent of total immigration from the FSU in 1997 was comprised of non-Jews. The "Migration News Archive," maintained by the University of California, Davis, reported in January 1999 that approximately 40 percent of the

17. Ibid.

18. *Jerusalem Report*, 13 June 1991.

19. Annual report of the Ministry of Immigration and Absorption, 1996. Calculated from table dated 8 June 1997, prepared by the Demographic Unit in the Planning and Research Division. Provided to me with a letter sent from its director, Shmuel Adler, 1 January 1998.

20. Calculated from Israel Foreign Ministry Information Service, "Israel: 1997 Population, Immigration Statistics Reported," 31 December 1997 (Internet), transcribed by the Foreign Broadcast Information Service (FBIS), 1 January 1998.

immigrants to Israel from the FSU in 1997 were "non-Jewish family members of Jews."[21] Another report based on government data put the proportion of non-Jews among 1997 immigrants from the FSU at 43.6 percent, adding that 15,600 of these lacked even a Jewish grandparent.[22] More recently, the Israeli press has reported that for the first nine months of 1998, 50.1 percent of immigrants from the FSU were "not halachically Jewish."[23]

ACCOUNTING FOR THE HIGH PROPORTION OF NON-JEWISH IMMIGRANTS

One often-mentioned explanation for the large influx of gentiles among the FSU immigrants emphasizes the tradition of document forgery among citizens of the FSU and the ease of forging such documents or acquiring them. It was reported, for example, that documents necessary to prove eligibility for immigration into Israel were available in Moscow in 1990 for a mere 20 rubles (approximately $20 at the official exchange rate, and approximately $5 at the black market rate).[24] But the forgery issue is but one facet of the larger legal framework within which the heavily non-Jewish complexion of this aliyah is explained.

Crucial to any explanation for the large proportion of FSU immigrants who are not Jewish is an understanding of the unanticipated result of amendments made to the Law of Return in 1970. On its website, Israel's Ministry of Foreign Affairs presents the standard account of the ideological purpose and historical role of the Law of Return as a vehicle for achievement of the most fundamental Zionist objective—to enable "every Jew, wherever he may be, the right to come to Israel as an *oleh* (a Jew immigrating to Israel) and become an Israeli citizen." The ministry goes on to explain the nature and purpose of the 1970 amendments as follows:

> Since 1970, the right to immigrate under this law has been extended to include the child and the grandchild of a Jew, the spouse of a child of a Jew and the spouse of the grandchild of a Jew. The purpose of this amendment is to ensure the unity of families, where intermarriage had occurred.[25]

Under the terms of the Law of Return, then, it is possible for dozens of people in any one family, who have never considered themselves Jewish and who will not be considered Jewish upon arrival in Israel, to qualify for Israeli residence and citizenship simply because one of their grandparents or their spouse or a parent of their spouse had a Jewish mother or maternal grandmother. Uri Gordon, long-time head of the Jewish Agency's Immigration and Absorption Department, offered many examples of how the Law of

21. "Migration News Archive," vol. 6, no. 1, http://migration.ucdavis.edu.

22. *Jerusalem Report*, 6 July 1998, p. 6. Under Orthodox Jewish law, Jewish identity is established by the Jewishness of one's mother.

23. Alex Somekh, "Bending the Law of Return," *Ha'aretz*, Internet English language version (http:\\www3.haaretz.co.il/eng/htmls/1_1.htm), 27 October 1998.

24. Yisrael Amrani, "Olim Not According to Halacha," *Ha'aretz*, 3 August 1990. For more recent information on the forgery of documents, see also Somekh, "Bending the Law of Return," op. cit.

25. www.Israel-mfa.gov.il/facts/state/spot-nat.html.

Return, as amended in 1970, opened the door to large numbers of non-Jews to enter Israel as citizens with the full rights of *'olim*. One of these examples was of a hypothetical Jew named Meir Levi from one of the Soviet bloc countries in Eastern Europe.

> Sixty years ago Meir Levi, a communist and atheist down to the bottom of his soul, married a Christian woman who bore him two sons. According to Jewish law, of course, these sons were not Jewish. The two sons grew up within a fully secular environment. They also married non-Jewish women and together had a total of five children. These five children then married non-Jews. They all lived a quiet and regular life fully integrated on every level into the society of Eastern Europe. Meanwhile, the Jewish grandfather died and was, as per his wish, buried with a secular ceremony. One day it became clear to the members of the family that because of the grandfather, may his soul be at peace, every member of the family had the right to immigrate to the Land of Israel, to receive immigrant certificates, and rights of 'olim. All that was needed was to present evidence of the Jewish identity of the grandfather—and the gates of Israel would be open before them. And so the five grandchildren and their spouses, the four parents, and also the elderly grandmother arrived in Israel, even though all of them openly said that they were not Jews and that they had no connection whatsoever to Judaism.[26]

Stories such as these, including reports about the gentile relatives of Orthodox converts from the United States, the Muslim relatives of a converted son of Jewish immigrants from Iran, the non-Jewish identity of the Falash Mura in Ethiopia, etc., have helped generate repeated calls for changes in the Law of Return. However, none of these proposals for changing the Law has made much legislative progress.[27]

One important reason for the failure of efforts to "regularize" the effects of the 1970 amendment to the Law of Return points to the larger context within which this legal quirk could have been allowed to produce, and continue to produce, such an enormous, largely unwelcome, and fully unanticipated outcome. The reason is politics—at the bureaucratic level and at the national level.

At the bureaucratic level, the engine that has driven non-Jewish aliyah has been the Israeli personnel stationed in the FSU and those in Israel supporting their work in the Jewish Agency, the Ministry of Immigration and Absorption, and elsewhere. In 1997, there were 82 Israeli *shlichim* (emissaries to encourage aliyah) in the FSU, each earning between $2,500 and $6,000 per month and working out of 27 offices with a staff totalling 1400 civilian workers and Hebrew teachers.[28] Evaluation of the performance of this apparatus, which determines the livelihoods and career prospects of the men and women comprising it, is based on the number of immigrants produced. Existing budgets and demands for additional money and personnel require, among other things, large estimates of the number of Jews left in the regions for which the shlichim and their support staffs are responsible as well as large estimates for the number of potential immigrants located

26. Uri Gordon, "VeShavu Nechadim L'gvulam" ("And Return the Grandchildren to Their Land"), *HaDoar*, 18 November 1994, p. 11.

27. Among the stillborn efforts to amend the Law of Return have been proposals by Likud MK Michael Kleiner, chairman of the Knesset Immigration and Absorption Committee, in July 1990; Immigrant Absorption Minister Yitzhak Peretz (Shas and his own "Moriah" faction), in November and December 1990; Uri Gordon, director of the Jewish Agency's Immigration and Absorption Office in 1994; and Israel's Chief Rabbis in 1995.

28. Bar-Mocha, "One of Every Three: The Appearance of the Sixteenth Tribe."

there. But the key marker of success or failure, of the importance or dispensability of functionaries in any particular region or city, is the monthly and yearly flow of immigrants generated.

Faced with very small numbers of halachically correct Jews left in the FSU, especially halachically correct Jews under the age of 55, the decisive question for officials responsible for producing immigrants is how many immigrants can be generated from the pool of those *eligible* to enter Israel as citizens, *not* how many immigrants can be generated from the pool of *Jews* in their regions. Thus, Michael Golan, director of immigration activities for western Russia in 1997, reported that there were 120,000 people in his region eligible to make aliyah under the Law of Return. Of these he estimated that only 30–35 percent were halachically Jewish. He then explained how hard he and his staff had to work to generate immigrants from his region, especially young immigrants. To achieve their objectives they dedicated their efforts toward all those eligible under the Law of Return, "even when we know that those with whom we are dealing are not Jewish."[29]

On the political level, Natan Sharansky's Yisrael Ba'Aliyah Party, which has held the balance in the Binyamin Netanyahu government and is likely to be a key player in coalition politics after the May 1999 elections, has a strong and vigorously expressed interest in maintaining an open door to as many Russian-speaking immigrants, and voters, as possible. As this population grows (recent arrivals from the FSU now comprise approximately 12 percent of the Israeli electorate), so does its political clout, making other politicians and parties even less willing to antagonize Russian-speaking voters or their political representatives by tightening rules against non-Jewish immigration. Some secular politicians are also opposed to moving forward with efforts to change the Law of Return because such attempts would be likely to be used by the Orthodox and ultra-Orthdox to prevent converts and others associated with non-Orthodox movements in the United States and elsewhere from being recognized as Jews in Israel.[30]

However, there are more fundamental political obstacles to changing the Law of Return than the influence of Russian-speaking Israelis or of secular Israelis worried about the "who is a Jew" issue and the fate of non-Orthodox converts from the West. As a result of significant changes in Israeli political culture over the last 20 years, any discussion of amending the Law of Return immediately raises some of the most delicate questions in Israeli politics—questions that could not have been raised when the Law was amended in 1970. In the last two decades Israeli authors have produced a number of critical histories of Zionism and of the rise of the State of Israel, scholarly works based on newly available state and army archives. These studies, along with research by sociologists, political scientists, and cultural critics, have laid the foundation for various kinds of "post-Zionist" thinking, and have helped create a political and cultural environment in which questions raised about the efficacy of the Law of Return, as currently written, are difficult to disentangle from the question of whether the entire concept of the "Return" from Galut

29. Ibid., p. 13.

30. See *Ha'aretz*, 24 July 1990. See also Shlomo Shamir, "Shamir in the Sights," *Ha'aretz*, 28 February 1992, transcribed in FBIS, 14 April 1992, pp. 16–18, for a discussion of the Lubavitch Rebbe's decision to stop agitating on behalf of changing the Law of Return.

(the diaspora), and hence the entire ideological apparatus of Zionism, is any longer relevant or appropriate. It is also difficult to disentangle from the "Who's a Jew" question and the bitter dispute over rules governing conversions. Most politicians, therefore, either avoid the question of amending the Law of Return out of fear that they will be misunderstood as "post-Zionists" who no longer support large scale aliyah, or welcome the issue as an opportunity to brand those who advocate it as "post-Zionists."[31] Meanwhile, on the liberal left, politicians who might be otherwise attracted to changing the Law of Return, as part of a transformation in the meaning of Zionism in a "post-Zionist" direction, are dissuaded from doing so because amendments proposed in connection with the FSU immigration are framed by political opponents as "discriminating" against non-Jews by depriving non-Jewish relatives of Jews of rights to family unification and citizenship.

There is yet another crucial political factor that helps explain the silence of those religious and right-wing politicians who were in power during the first three years of the massive aliyah from the former Soviet Union, and who, under other circumstances, might have been expected to object most vigorously to the flood of gentiles coming in to the country and the dilution of Jewish culture and the increase in intermarriage that were always bound to be consequences of it. When the vast increase in immigration from the FSU began in 1989, Israel was in the midst, and still is to a large degree, of a fundamental and polarizing political struggle—whether permanently to incorporate the West Bank and Gaza Strip into the Jewish state by massive settlement, *de facto* annexation, and suppression and quiet expulsion of Arab inhabitants, or divide the Land of Israel by withdrawing from most or all of these territories, thereby laying the basis for an historic compromise with the Palestinians. The *intifada* was at its height in 1989, adding uncertainty about the country's capacity to bear the costs of Palestinian dissatisfaction and international opprobrium to an already super-charged political atmosphere.

Since demography was and always had been the single most important argument in the discursive arsenal of the anti-annexationist camp, the immigration from the FSU figured crucially in this fight over the state's future. With Jewish emigration from Israel at historically high levels in the 1980s and immigration rates relatively low, with Jewish rates of natural increase diminishing and Arab rates remaining at considerably higher levels, with Arab out-migration greatly reduced by the effects of the 1991 Gulf War, and with calls for large scale "transfer" of the Arab population fading from respectable political discussion, an Arab majority within the administrative and political jurisdiction of Israel appeared imminent. Polls showed the hitherto undecided middle of the Israeli Jewish spectrum, which had gravitated until then toward options of "deciding not to decide" and "maintaining the status quo," moving strongly toward a willingness to cede substantial portions of the territories to Palestinian rule—anything to achieve separation between Jews and Arabs and preserve Jewish predominance within the State of Israel.

31. Among Jewish-Zionist parties, another specific political rationale for maintaining a public silence about the substantial proportion of non-Jews among the FSU immigrants has been fear that attention drawn to the issue would result in powerful ultra-Orthodox reactions against the immigration. Landres, "Non-Jewish Olim," p. 8.

For the annexationist right, therefore, the flood of "Jewish" immigrants from the FSU (and from Ethiopia as well), and the much touted image of a million or more arrivals within a short period of time, was a godsend. Speaking to Likud Party veterans in January 1990, Prime Minister Yitzhak Shamir justified his opposition to any territorial compromise with the Palestinians by proclaiming that "big immigration requires Israel be big as well." He exulted in the "miraculous" appearance of the mass immigration, the death blow it was dealing to the demographic argument, and the demoralization and disarray it was causing among the Arabs.

> Just when many among us were saying that time is working against us, time has brought us this aliya and has solved everything. In five years, we won't even be able to recognize the country. . .The Arabs around us are in a state of disarray and panic. . .They are shrouded by a feeling of defeat, because they see the intifada doesn't help. . .they cannot stop the natural streaming of the Jewish people to their homeland.[32]

It would be an interesting exercise to conduct a systematic content analysis of debate in Israel over the territories question in the years immediately prior to and following 1989 for evidence of a sharp decline in the salience of the demographic issue in public argumentation. My own tracking of the debate during that period suggests that one would indeed find plenty of such evidence.[33] Indeed, it was striking to see how annexationist, often religious, figures who had hewn to strict halachic interpretations during the sharp dispute in 1988 over "Who is a Jew," were now ignoring the question altogether when it came to encouraging and welcoming hundreds of thousands of people of questionable identity as "Jews returning to their homeland." At the same time, leading secular doves, whose positions in 1988 on the "Who is a Jew" question were framed as anti-parochial and opposed to the use of halacha to make determinations of political and legal identities, were among those who voiced greatest concern as to the genuineness of the Jewish identity of the immigrants.

For example, on 24 May 1990 the Van Leer Institute in Jerusalem convened a symposium on "The Demographic Issue and the Soviet Immigration." The moderator, Moshe Ma'oz, noted that a drastic change had occurred in perceptions of the demographic situation. Three years ago, he observed, there had been a symposium on the demographic problem for Israel, but now, in light of the massive immigration underway from the FSU, it was the Arab world that was worried about the demographic problem. Although Sergio Della Pergola, a professional demographer, pointed out that natural increase would in the long run outweigh immigration, and that every 100,000 immigrants would postpone only by one year that date at which Arabs would become a majority in the whole Land of Israel, the overall perception was that the massive aliyah was fundamentally shifting the balance of expectations about the political impact of demographic discussions.

32. *Jerusalem Post*, 15 January 1990.

33. One noted Palestinian intellectual commented at the time that the mass immigration from the FSU would eliminate the demographic incentive for the Labor Party and other Israelis to embrace territorial compromise. See remarks by Sari Nussaybah published in *Al-Fajr* (Jerusalem), 29 January 1990, transcribed by FBIS in *Daily Report: Near East and South Asia*, 31 January 1990, p. 22.

This is apparently what prompted another participant, Uzi Baram—one of the top three leaders at the time in the Labor Party and a well-known and fervent secularist—to raise the question of how "Jewish" these immigrants actually were, noting that many did not even know what Yom Kippur was and had, as a token of their Jewishness, only the fact of one Jewish grandparent. All kinds of Soviet citizens, Baram warned, were passing themselves off as Jews in order to escape to Israel. "If we send eight ships to Odessa," he declared, "they'll all be filled with people who would claim to be Jewish."

The responding comments of Yisrael Harel were ironic, but instructive, when considering the extent to which the polarizing political debate over the territories was driving political discourse and determining the rules for accepting or rejecting the wave of immigrants. Harel is a prominent religious journalist, a leader of the settler movement Gush Emunim, and the founder and long-time editor of *Nekuda*, the journal of the settlers of the West Bank and Gaza Strip. Harel gleefully quoted the mistaken predictions of dovish politicians and professional demographers about the impossibility of demographic shifts in the Jews' favor. Harel characterized the immigration from the FSU as a fulfillment of Zionist dreams, as a good, Zionist 'aliyah, and strongly criticized the (Likud) government for not being willing to lower substantially living standards in Israel so that all those in the FSU who wanted to come to Israel could do so—estimating that figure as 1.4 million, or at least 400,000 more than the government was estimating. In contrast to the secularist Baram, Harel, who was the only member of the panel wearing a yarmulke, made no mention of halacha or the halachic status of these immigrant "Jews."

Similar points were made by Zvi Slonim, director of the Land of Israel Academy, in an interview with me conducted on 7 June 1990, at his office in the West Bank settlement of Kedumim. Slonim is a former general-secretary of Gush Emunim and a well-known figure in the settler community. He described his intensive activities to encourage mass immigration from the FSU and had just returned from a trip to Riga, Latvia, and other cities. Against the background of the intifada, he characterized the aliyah from the FSU as a part of God's plan, and expressed anger at the government for not helping the immigration to accelerate. Still, he said, "a thousand Jews a night are arriving." When pressed, however, he acknowledged that a goodly share of these immigrants were, in fact, not Jewish. He characterized Baram's concern about the Jewish identity of the immigrants as politically disingenuous, while reporting that in his experience as a *shaliach*, he had seen that seven of every 25 immigrants were "clearly not Jewish." He indicated that when he did meet a potential immigrant who was clearly not Jewish, he would advise him not to come, but would vouch for him if the candidate pressed himself forward. He believed that such non-Jews, including many gentile friends of Jews living in Russia and working for the Jewish Agency, would be "quickly converted, with a *bris* [ritual circumcision], according to halacha."

The belief among Gush Emunim leaders and other redemptionist Zionist leaders was vividly articulated in an evening *shiur* (lesson) given on 6 June 1990, by Member of Knesset and long-time National Religious Party leader Rabbi Hanan Porat. With his characteristic crooked smile, Porat peered around the sanctuary in the old, original building of the Rav Kook Yeshiva, where the founders of Gush Emunim received their

training. He reassured a rapt audience that, in the midst of a tumultuous political crisis, Jews could have full confidence that it was God's hand that was bringing the massive wave of Russian-Jewish immigrants to Israel. He called on true believers to step back from the mundane political struggles of everyday life and appreciate the full-scale miracle God was performing for his people with the arrival of masses of immigrants from the FSU. There was no better proof, he said, that religion and politics could not and should not be separated and that God's promise of Israel's right and ability to rule the entire Land of Israel must and would be fulfilled.[34]

Thus, in the late 1980s and early 1990s, the legal, political, and ideological framework of many of those who might have been expected to object vigorously to the mass influx of gentiles into the country, led them instead not only to accept it but to encourage it. According to a popular saying of the time, the key fact about the immigrants from the FSU that ensured support for their arrival from many Israeli Jews was that they were "neither Arab nor Oriental."

ISRAEL AS A "NON-ARAB" STATE

Leaving aside the presence, as reported by the Central Bureau of Statistics, of more than 160,000 foreign (non-Palestinian, non-citizen, non-Jewish) workers within Israel's borders, the immigration from both the FSU and from Ethiopia has created a population of approximately 325,000 "non-Arab"[35] citizens who are judged, by at least some important elements within the Jewish population, as "not-Jewish."[36] Using the official figures provided by the Central Bureau of Statistics for the population of Israel it can be seen that Christians, in percentage terms and despite their relatively low birth rate, are by far the fastest growing religious group in the country—having risen 12.7 percent from 1995 to 1996.

The data displayed in Table 1 also show how the Central Bureau of Statistics has tried to camouflage this awkward fact. In the 1998 volume of the *Statistical Abstract of Israel*, the Central Bureau of Statistics changed its reporting procedure. There, the number of Christians in the country in 1997 is listed as 128,000, a *drop* of 30 percent compared to the figure listed for Christians in the previous year's *Abstract*. To compensate, a new category of "without religious classification," has been added, comprised overwhelmingly

34. Personal observation and field notes, 6 June 1990, Jerusalem.

35. I am including in the category of "Arab," Druze and Circassians as well as Christian Arabs so as to simplify the formulations and, with respect to the Druze, because as an ethno-political and linguistic category, it is appropriate. The CBS estimate for the number of foreign workers in Israel is quite conservative. *Yediot Aharanot* put the number at 250,000. See *Yediot Aharonot* editorial as reported by the Government Press Office, "Summary of Editorials from the Hebrew Press," 28 July 1998. This was also the figure used by Foreign Minister Ariel Sharon in December 1998 for legal and illegal foreign workers in the country. See transcription by FBIS of Sharon's address to the Likud Central Committee, broadcast by Qol Yisra'el (Israel Radio), 27 December 1998.

36. Regardless of what Haredi (ultra-Orthodox) spokesmen may say in public, in private many Haredi groups do not consider the Russian and Ethiopian immigrants to be reliably Jewish, and hence maintain intra-communal "blacklists" for purposes of approving marriages between members of Haredi communities and these immigrants. Interview with Rav Moskowitz, director of the Department of Eruv Affairs, Tel Aviv, 31 January 1998.

TABLE 1
Ethno-Religious Groupings in Israel

	Jews	Muslims	Christians	Druze	Without Religious Classification
1995	4,459,500	813,000	162,600	94,000	
1996	4,637,400	842,500	183,200	96,300	
% increase 1995–96	1.9%	3.6%	12.7%	2.4%	
1997	4,753,000	886,000	128,000	98,000	123,000

of non-Jewish (almost entirely Christian) immigrants whose religious status is unregistered, under investigation, or simply inconvenient to determine.

Whether officially "Christian" or not, this population of non-Jews represents between eight and nine percent of the non-Arab population of the state. In some towns and cities, in which these immigrants have come to be concentrated (such as Kiryat Shemona), the percentage is much higher. In a country as focused on the demographic balance between Arabs and Jews in various regions and on the political opinions registered within the Jewish community, as opposed to those registered when Arab and Jewish citizens are surveyed together, this non-Jewish population is big enough to have real impact on the truth of claims about the size, opinions, future growth rate, patterns of habitation, etc. of the "Jewish" population.

For example, during a panel discussion of settlement and population trends in the Negev conducted in Beersheva by geographers and demographers from Ben-Gurion University, it was said that because of a slowdown in the flow of FSU immigrants to the Negev and a high rate of natural increase among the Bedouin, the region was in danger of soon losing its Jewish majority. During subsequent discussion, the scholars acknowledged that their calculations included what was known to be the false assumption that all the immigrants were Jewish. In fact, they said that, in their view, 20–25 percent of the immigrants were not Jewish. Instructively, however, this did not lead them to think they needed to change the reporting of their data or their conclusions. For what, in effect, they were interested in was not whether or not there was or would be a "Jewish" majority in the Negev, but whether there would be a "non-Arab" majority.[37] A similar response was given to me by one of Israel's leading pollsters. Asked whether reports by the pollster's organization concerning "Jewish" opinion on various subjects included the opinions of immigrants, including non-Jewish immigrants, the pollster responded that 2–3 percent of non-Arabs polled as Jews did in fact identify themselves as non-Jews, although the organization's report of polling data included these responses and all responses of

37. Panel discussion and follow-up interviews, International Conference on Geopolitics and Globalization in a Postmodern World, Beersheva, 29 January 1998.

immigrants within the "Jewish" category.[38] It was acknowledged, in light of the substantial numbers involved, that the results concerning "Jewish opinion" were therefore actually false, including reports of polling results showing a slim majority of "Jews" favoring this or that policy, or holding this or that belief. It was also acknowledged, in response to questioning, that the only accurate way to report the data would be as a profile, not of "Jewish" opinion, but of "non-Arab" opinion. "Yes, that's correct," I was told, "but if I said that I would have to seek political asylum in the United States!"[39] More forthrightly, Arnon Soffer, a demographer from Haifa University, who estimated early in 1998 that 125,000, or approximately 16 percent of FSU immigrants, were not Jewish, has nevertheless indicated that depending on how "Jew" is defined with respect to the immigrants, this figure could change, thereby determining the date by which there would emerge a non-Jewish majority in the "Whole Land of Israel."[40]

The increasing awkwardness of the identity question in Israel is also apparent in the categories used by the government bureaucracy to adjust to the new, more complex, realities. For years the interior ministry has been issuing increasing numbers of identity cards with nationality listed, not as "Jew," "Arab," or "Druze," but as "unregistered." One very serious proposal for partially addressing the classification problems faced by the ministry is to eliminate the nationality category from the *teudat zehut* (internal identity card). Meanwhile, instead of reporting demographic, economic, and other statistics according to a distinction between "Jews" and "Arabs," or between Jews, Muslims and Christians, or between Jewish and non-Jewish, or Jewish Israelis and "minorities," the Central Bureau of Statistics has come to rely on the distinction between "Jews" versus "Arabs and others." When designing the 1995 census, which was the first census taken in Israel since 1983, the Bureau was forced to come face to face with the impossibility of formulating a definition of "Jew" that would be acceptable to the consumers of its information, with the unreliability of answers given to questions about individual identity, and with the now statistically significant number of individuals whose identities for one reason or other could not reliably be determined. After much internal deliberation and argument, the CBS chose to omit altogether any questions in the census about the religious or national identity of those polled.[41] The questionnaire employed in the 1983 census asked, in item seven, for the respondent to indicate whether "you are a Jew, a Muslim, a Greek Orthodox, a Greek Catholic, a Latin Catholic, another sort of Christian, a Druze, or some other (to be specified)." The 1995 questionnaire, by contrast, asks for no information whatsoever, in any of its questions, pertaining to the religion or national origin of the respondent. Despite this change in policy, however, the extraordinarily low rate of return of completed forms to the census takers and the unprecedented delay in the release of data

38. Since most non-Jewish immigrants are seeking, in every way, to "pass" as Jews, it can of course be assumed that this 2–3 percent would be a fraction of the number of respondents who are actually not Jewish.

39. Interview, Tel Aviv, 2 February 1998.

40. Arnon Soffer, Haifa University, 26 January 1998. Interview with Professor Benjamin Beit-Hallahmi, Haifa University, 26 January 1998.

41. Interview with Yael Natan, Office of the Spokesman of the Central Bureau of Statistics, Jerusalem, 11 January 1995.

from the 1995 census are explained in part by problems associated with the increasing delicacy of this kind of personal information.

Indeed, only a portion of the data gathered in 1995 has been released. According to interviews with leading demographers and statisticians associated with the design and implementation of the census, the most important reasons for problems experienced in translating collected data into publishable statistics were the resistance by Haredim (ultra-Orthodox) and others to providing economic data, and substantial changes in the composition of Israel's population—changes which include large numbers of foreign workers and immigrants of questionable legal and national/religious status. This circumstance discouraged truthful responses, or indeed any responses, to the census takers' questions, and made it more difficult for census takers to make valid inferences about inhabitants of particular dwellings based on neighborhood and other factors. Since the CBS is constrained to provide information by population group, it must rely on "imputation" to make judgments about identity, judgments that, for the reasons just stated, are of decreasing reliability.[42] This means, of course, that over time, CBS statistics broken down by population group, no matter how defined, will be increasingly inaccurate.

Because of the controversy over the definition of "Jew," the drastic increase in the number of difficult, blurry, or anomalous cases, and with different ministries controlled at different times by different political parties holding very different views about conversion, immigration, and Jewish identity, more and more Israelis now find themselves "Jewish" for some purposes and "non-Jewish" for other purposes. I was able to demonstrate this fact in 1995 by representing myself at the interior ministry as a new Russian 'oleh in need of a teudat zehut in order to get married (to a Jew). I was told, when I conducted this exercise in January 1995, that all I needed to have "Jew" indicated on my identity card was my teudat oleh (immigration certificate), which would have been given me by the Ministry of Immigration and Absorption, in cooperation with the Jewish Agency, upon my arrival in the country. At that time, the Ministry of Immigration and Absorption was run by the Mapam Party and was anything but fastidious in its extraction of halachically relevant information in the airport arrival lounge before filling out the necessary forms. Thus, from the point of view of the Ministry of Immigration and Absorption and the Ministry of Interior, I would have been considered (in early 1995) as a Jew. However, when I went to the religion ministry, with the same story, I was told that my papers from the other ministries, listing me as a Jew, were irrelevant for the religion ministry's purposes and that the normal procedure would be to submit my case, on an ad hoc basis, to the Chief Rabbinate for a decision. What I was, in other words, was a function of which ministerial building I entered or exited.

The political implications of the widening gap between the simple categories traditionally associated with discourse about national identity in Israel (a Jewish majority versus an Arab minority living in a Jewish state) and the complicated reality of Israeli populations, including but not confined to new FSU immigrants, who are neither Arabs

42. Interviews conducted in Jerusalem, 4 February 1998.

nor Jews, have only begun to be felt. Opposition to large scale immigration, always and understandably present among Arab Israelis, has appeared among Sephardi and ultra-Orthodox communities, who resent that special benefits are extended to "Ashkenazim" who are not even Jews, or to immigrants, Ashkenazi or otherwise, who introduce opportunities for cultural mixing and mass intermarriage into Israeli/Jewish society. One can envision new political coalitions arising which, on issues of civil liberties, religious coercion (burial, marriage, divorce, bans against pork, etc.), and the officially "Jewish" or "Zionist" character of the state, could link Israeli Arabs, non-Jewish immigrants, liberal-secular Jewish groups, and even "foreign" workers. Nor will it be as easy for lawmakers to use "eligible to immigrate into Israel under the Law of Return" as a proxy for discriminating in favor of Jews in legislation governing access to public resources. Religion will be ineluctably separated from the state as ultra-Orthodox and Orthodox rabbis ignore state-sanctioned classifications of "Jews" and "non-Jews," whether made by the interior ministry or other branches of the bureaucracy, in favor of their own informal but increasingly comprehensive registers of Israelis they are wiling to treat as Jewish.

Consider how the crystallization of a large and politically important population of Israelis who are neither Arabs nor Jews, and who will not, or will not be allowed to, convert to Judaism, could enhance the attractiveness of political and cultural tropes emphasizing "Israeli" over "Jewish" identity. This tendency is apparent in remarks by Rabbi David Clayman, head of the American Jewish Congress' Israel office, who predicted that ultimately Israel's rabbis would take a pragmatic course and allow the non-Jewish immigrants to assimilate into Israeli society. "Then it would be up to the great levelers in Israeli society, the school and Army duty, to turn them into *Israelis*."[43]

Another approach, equally pragmatic but inclined to maintain the Jewish nature of the state even at the expense of blurring and expanding the notion of what it is to be Jewish, is apparent in the first flickers of public discussion of the issue within the national religious camp. In an unusually wide-ranging and frank presentation of views of many rabbis and activists published in *Nekuda*, an attitude appears to be crystallizing within the national-religious community that the problem must be solved by loosening the meaning and requirements of conversion so that a "mass conversion" of the FSU gentile immigrants can be accomplished, even as the door is closed tightly against entry of more of them. One leading voice within the settler community, Rabbi Yoel Ben Nun, has even proposed accomplishing this kind of mass conversion via biennial public festivals during which all Israelis, including the immigrants, would formally and ritually reaffirm their commitment to the convenant, the Jewish people, and, in some form or other, to the religious commandments.[44]

At the present time, however, these "Israeli" or Jewish-assimilative identitarian responses to the fact of masses of non-Arab, non-Jewish Israeli citizens, remain only speculative possibilities. Although various special seminaries have been established to accelerate conversion, these operate mostly according to traditional Orthodox, or

43. *Newsweek*, 8 April 1991.
44. Stern, "L'dchot O L'karev?" p. 39.

ultra-Orthodox, guidelines which keep the numbers of converts too small to address the scale of the problem. Another reason why pressures toward finding an early solution to this problem are weak compared to the inclination to let the situation evolve, is that most non-Jewish immigrants continue to prefer to try to pass as Jews, rather than to draw attention to their differentness and their problems, by organizing on their own behalf (either for rights as non-Jewish Israelis, or for easier conversion opportunities). As long as the authorities continue to permit large numbers of non-Jewish immigrants to enter the country, and until a generation grows up in Israel which confronts repeated problems associated with an undefined and unsettled status, this pattern of quiescence is likely to hold. But for those interested in considering the changing meaning of traditional Zionist categories, and of the concepts "Jew" and of "Jewish state," and for statisticians, pollsters, and social scientists who must adjust their categories and reporting habits to the "non-Arab" character of the state and its majority population, the complexities of the present are as important and as interesting as those of the future.