

## **Foreign Workers in Israel. How Ethno-Nationalism prevents Structures of Representation**

*Lidia Averbukh\**

### **Abstract**

*The main principle the Israeli state relies upon when dealing with documented and undocumented foreign workers is non-involvement. This course of action reflects the restrictive character of Israeli migration regime toward non-Jews. In the first place, the aim is to prevent permanent settlement of foreign workers and therefore, their gradual recognition as residents of Israel. Within the framework of Israeli ethno-nationalism and its immanent dynamic of segregation, foreign workers constitute one isolated group among others. So far the labor migration regime is following ethno-national rules, the labor market can be regularly supplied with workers without challenging the Jewish character of the state. One can observe that recent dynamics in recruitment, such as Asianization, feminization as well as non-recruitment from Arab countries, are not posing a threat to ethno-nationalism but rather consolidate it.*

**Keywords:** labor migration, ethno-nationalism, representation

## **Arbeitsmigration in Israel. Wie der Ethnonationalismus Repräsentationsstrukturen verhindert**

### **Zusammenfassung:**

*Das Vorgehen des Staates Israel in Bezug auf legale und illegale Arbeitsmigration zeichnet sich durch einen Mangel an Repräsentation und durch Nichteinmischung aus. Diese Einstellung entspringt dem grundsätzlich restriktiven Einwanderungsregime, das einer nennenswerten Ansammlung von nicht-jüdischen Bürgern im Staat vorbeugen möchte. Eine permanente Ansiedlung von Arbeitsmigranten und die Anerkennung ihres Mitbürgerstatus als Folge soll dabei vermieden werden. Gleichzeitig befindet sich der israelische Arbeitsmarkt seit der Liberalisierung der 90er Jahre in wachsender Abhängigkeit von Arbeitsmigration, was zu einer Diskrepanz zwischen den Interessen der ethnisch-nationalen Einwanderungspolitik und privaten ökonomischen Akteuren führt. Allerdings haben sich in letzter Zeit in der Rekrutierung von Arbeitskräften Dynamiken entwickelt, die die Arbeitsmigranten zunehmend zu einer Gesellschaftsgruppe innerhalb des gesamtgesellschaftlichen Ethno-Nationalismus formen, so dass dieser anstatt mit dem migrantischen Arbeitsmarkt ideologisch zu konkurrieren, durch diesen selbst zusehends konsolidiert wird.*

**Schlagwörter:** Arbeitsmigration, Ethnischer Nationalismus, Repräsentation

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\* Lidia Averbukh, SWP Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik, Forschungsgruppe Naher-/Mittlerer Osten und Afrika. E-Mail: [lidia.averbukh@swp-berlin.org](mailto:lidia.averbukh@swp-berlin.org)

## 1. History and facts about labor migration in Israel

There are two important aspects which contribute to understanding general policy relating to foreign workers in Israel. The first one is the attitude of Israel as an 'ethnic democracy' (Smootha 1989) which denies accepting any permanent immigration of non-Jews. The second one was Israel's perpetual economic dependence on Israeli Palestinian workers and Palestinian workers from the Occupied Territories from the mid-1950s till the mid-1990s.

From the mid-1950s onward, construction and agriculture sectors along with some other services became rapidly dependent on cheap Palestinian workers, with the consequence of creating ethnically divided sectors in the Israeli labor market. Before the Six-Day War, the secondary sector was filled with Palestinians within Israel. Afterwards it was extended to Palestinians from the Occupied Territories as well (Semyonov/Lewin-Epstein 1987).

By the late 1980s, around 120,000 Palestinians from the Occupied Territories had commuted into Israel on a daily basis, more than half of them undocumented. In total they constituted almost 10 per cent of the labor force in Israel. In its turn, this accounted for 25 per cent in agricultural and 45 per cent in construction sectors respectively (Alexander 2007).

Due to the first Palestinian intifada in 1987 and to inner tensions during Oslo negotiations in the early 1990s, which were accompanied by frequent terror attacks, the border to the Occupied Territories was closed (Rosenhek 2002). Israel decided to disengage from low-paid, Palestinian labor force and therefore, effectively banned the employment of Palestinian workers inside the country. This decision led to severe labor shortages in the secondary sectors, especially in construction and agriculture. In 1993, under increasing pressure from employers and their lobby the government allowed recruiting foreign workers from overseas as a 'temporary solution' and a substitution for the Palestinians (Ministry of Labor 1990).

The sudden economic dissociation from Palestinian commuters along with the recruitment of foreign workers in the mid-1990s made Israeli economy rapidly enter the global labor market (Alexander 2007).

Since then the number of foreign workers in the Israeli labor market had been growing continuously, thus outperforming the share of Palestinian workers in the history of Israeli labor. The level of foreign workers reached its peak of 11 per cent in 2002 which resulted

in the political turn and aggressive actions like deportation (Wolfssohn 2007). Nevertheless, Israel is still to be found at the high end of industrialized economies which are extremely dependent on foreign workforce (Kemp 2010).

The Israeli Central Bureau of Statistics (ICBS) provides data on documented foreign workers by sex, age, country of citizenship and type of employment by the year of arrival. According to this data, foreign workers come from about one hundred different countries. In 2013 71,3 % and in 2014 70,2 % of them came from Asian countries only, including: Philippines, India, Turkey, Nepal, China, Sri Lanka, Thailand and Asian republics of the former USSR. In 2013 49 % and in 2014 50 % of the total number were female.

The ethnic background of the newcomers has changed over time. The share of foreign workers from Eastern Europe, who were mostly employed in construction and constituted a greater part of foreign workers in the first ten years, has declined. The number of documented foreign workers from Southeastern Asia, on the contrary, has risen from one third to half of the whole foreign labor force during the same period. Since then China, Thailand and the Philippines constitute the main sources for recruitment of foreign workers for Israel.

Alongside the changes in the ethnic composition towards 'Asianization', Israel is witnessing a steady feminization of foreign labor. Women account for approximately half of the foreign labor flow. Their average age is about 37 years old, which is slightly above the average age of male foreign workers (Kemp 2010).

Unlike agriculture and construction sectors, where foreign workers initially served as substitutes for Palestinians from the Occupied Territories, the employment of foreign workers as nurses and caregivers in the elderly care sector gave birth to a completely new occupational sphere. Managed by manpower agencies and private service providers, female foreign workers have often no contact to state officials at all. In recent years, even more of them have arrived from the Philippines, Nepal and India.<sup>1</sup>

1 Organizations concerned with foreign workers' issues such as Hotline for Migrant Workers (HMW) and Kav La'Oved (Workers' hotline) have often warned of the vulnerable position of these women due to their poor language skills in English or Hebrew and reported abuse. It seems like an informal hierarchy has been created in the care giving sector wherein the most dependent disabled elderly are assigned to female foreign workers in most precarious situations (Sinai 2008).

A huge number of foreign workers in Israel is undocumented (Rosenhek 2002). The existing information on undocumented foreign workers is not very accurate and thus, primarily based on estimations (Wolfssohn 2007). According to the estimates of ICBS, their number was around 91,000 in 2014, which is only a little less than the reported number of documented workers (101,000).

One of the reasons for the huge level of undocumented workers is Israel's attractiveness as a destination for tourists and pilgrims. The Israeli officials find it difficult to differentiate between normal tourists and migrants who pretend to be tourists for the purposes of finding work. Another pertinent way to become an undocumented worker is to lose a work permit by overstaying work visa or breaking the working agreement. As a consequence of high dependence on the employer or the employing agency, a number of actions such as sudden pregnancy or a change of workplace are considered to be a violation of the contract.

A survey conducted in the early 2000s showed that among 4,400 undocumented foreign workers who were waiting for deportation in prison, 59 per cent entered Israel as tourists and 41 per cent with a working visa (Kemp 2010).

The ICBS' estimates of undocumented workers who entered Israel as tourists are based on the number of visitors from non-Western or undeveloped countries as well as on the assumption that many of them will end up working as foreigners without permits. Following this assumption most of undocumented foreign workers come from such countries as Jordan, Mexico, Colombia, Brazil, and some of former Soviet Republics. There is no official recruitment of foreign workers to Israel from these countries (Shaps 2008).<sup>2</sup> In general foreign workers without permits work in the same sectors as documented workers.

As far as the labor migration system in Israel is concerned, its main policy aspects – the ethno-national position and the temporariness – still form the backdrop of attitudes towards foreign workers, although their presence has become a permanent situation and

<sup>2</sup> Since 2016 one exclusion is made for a pilot project in the hotel industry in Eilat, which hires about 1500 Jordanian cleaners. The workers arrive to Israel every morning and return to Jordan every evening. They are not allowed to travel outside the Eilat city limits and are under rigid supervision of Shin Bet. (Booth, W/ Eglash, R. for The Washington Post, 17.5.2016).

therefore, non-Jewish immigration is now a long lasting issue.

## 2. Ethno-national immigration regime

It is quite common in Israel to be an immigrant. It can even be called the main characteristic of Israeli identity; only few Israeli Jews have no immigration background.

Exclusionary tendencies toward foreign workers are neither determined by their recent arrival, nor do they have to do with the lack of integration because of the short time spent in Israel. Labor migrants are foreign on account of their status and ethnicity. By not belonging to the Jewish majority they usually can't become a part of the Jewish State, either by naturalization or by assimilation.

A large part of the non-Jewish population is not consistent with basic Zionist ideology. In this context, it is less surprising to hear from a former minister of Labor and Social Affairs, that "Israel is not an immigration country" (quoted in Bartram 2011).

Israel's core element of its identity as a Jewish state lies in the basic idea of being a state for the Jews from all around the world who are a priori a part of the Israeli Jewish citizenry.

This idea has its legal background in the so-called Law of Return, which was constituted in 1950 and modified in 1970. Unlike western liberal immigration regimes, the Law of Return organizes and structures the Jewish immigration to Israel without taking preference either in age, economic or educational status (Cohen 2002). The only thing that really matters in this case is Jewish origin or accomplished conversion to Judaism, that allows immigration and achievement of Israeli citizenship upon arrival.<sup>3</sup>

In this context, foreign workers cannot be described as normal immigrants. Hence, huge flows of Thais, Philippinas, Romanians, etc, who altogether constitute the majority of non-Jewish newcomers, aren't recognized as immigrants in the official statistics, but as *ovdim zarim*. In Hebrew, this term stands for 'foreign workers' which at the same time carries a biblical connotation of 'idolatry'. This semantics emphasizes once

<sup>3</sup> The Law to Return is not a unique legal structure, e.g. in Germany, one can observe huge migration flows of German ethnics since the Second World War. However, the Israeli Law is grounded on thousands of years lasting heritage and a possible owing of Eretz Israel by the ancestors.

again the strong ethno-national character of Israel and conveys the idea of how difficult it is for non-Jews – especially foreign workers who are expected to return home – to integrate.

So, how did the Israeli society get along with all these non-Jewish newcomers and this new type of alien since the broad recruitment in the 1990s? The main attitude can be described as the desire to preserve the Jewish nature of the state. So, in comparison to many other so-called ‘Guestworker societies’ no strong racist perceptions have yet been developed in the Israeli society. This can be explained, on the one hand, by the clear cut between citizens and foreigners in the applied policy. On the other hand, the vast majority of Israelis expect foreign workers to return home as soon as they finish their job. At the same time, due to the overall weak position of foreign workers in Israeli society as well as the lack of representation structures, which could contribute to better conditions for foreign workers, there is not so much for Israelis to worry about. Nevertheless, polls show that in case foreigners were given the possibility to settle down in Israel, they would be very likely to face vast xenophobic attitudes from a large proportion of Israelis (Raijman/Semyonov 2003).

Similar to their Palestinian predecessors who had to return to the Occupied Territories by night and express no claims regarding accommodation and legal protection, foreign workers nowadays, even after two decades of their stay in the country, are still expected to do the same. In this way, Israeli national political elites hope to avoid their long-term settlement and to prevent any speaking up.

### 3. Balancing labor market regime and Israeli ethno-nationalism

The paradoxical combination of utmost necessity of labor migration into the Israeli labor market and the strict non-recognition of foreigners as residents appears to be less contradicting on the second glance. I want to point out three dynamics regarding the recruitment of foreign workers which allow constituting a parallel foreign worker society and continuously supply the labor market with workers from abroad without harming the ethno-national framework and therefore the very core of the Israeli ideology. These dynamics, which intensified over recent years in the process of the ongoing consolidation of ethno-nationalism in Israeli politics as well as society, are: Asianization, non-recruitment from Arab countries and feminization.

Due to the high share of documented foreign workers originating in southern Asia they can be visibly differentiated from the Jewish majority as well as from the Arab minority on behalf of their physical appearance. As a consequence of the prolonged Israeli-Palestinian conflict as well as deep ideological clefs among the Jewish majority itself, one can observe an exploitation of “visibility” as one of the major vehicles of ethno-nationalism which draw a line between one societal group and another. In such a divided society as the Israeli one, different societal groups used to develop their own codex in regard to their public appearance and thus easily recognize accomplices and set themselves apart from the “others”. This factual “visibility” can be constructed as an including and excluding tool along religious, ideological as well as racial distinctive features. Religious codices of appearance in Israeli context, such as “black and white” for ultra-orthodox Jews, the demonstration of tzitzit and special forms of yarmulke among national-religious (dati-leumi) groups and western clothes of secular groups, carry within the Israeli realm first and foremost ideological connotation. Although the Israeli society presents a broad spectrum of skin colors and constitutes one of the most various societies around the world due to the origin of its inhabitants, the differentiation between white and dark, European and Middle-Eastern, Ashkenazi and Mizrahi, still plays a huge role in self-identification and self-perception in Israel. The tool of “visibility” is important within the framework of ethno-nationalism because, it is crucial in order to identify and recognize quickly companions and the “others”. It is not surprising that especially in the Israeli reality of potential and omnipresent danger the tool of “visibility” is perceived as useful and has found fertile ground for its development. In this context, foreign workers from Asian countries do not constitute a threat to this form of ethno-nationalism in Israel, as they are always visible as foreigners and fit in the fragmented look of the society by remaining different at the same time. They can be easily recognized by officials, which simplifies controlling procedures and if required deportation, as well as by other residents, who since the mid-1990s learned to associate Asian people with foreign workers. At the same time, not much interaction takes place between residents and foreign workers<sup>4</sup> due to their special fields of work and temporariness of their visas.

4 It is common to refer to all foreign workers as “Philippinos”, unregarded their factual country of origin.

The “visibility” strengthens the effects of segregation and temporariness and as long as these conditions are kept, they are not undermining the principle of Israel being a Jewish state.

The second dynamic which balances the coexistence of ethno-nationalism and labor migration regime in Israel is the non-recruitment of Arab workers. Under the circumstances of the unproportional rise of the Arab population compared to the Jewish population, Israeli officials are highly concerned about future demography and the eventual decline of the Jewish majority. The intense demographic anxiety stems from the Arab-Jewish fertility differential, which peaked in the mid-1960s when the total fertility rate (TFR) of Muslim Arabs soared to 9.23 while the TFR of Jews remained at 3.39 (Steinfeld 2015). This difference serves as rationale for the need of a long-term maintenance of Jewish majority. The entry of Arabs is continuously monitored and in many cases tourists and visitors with Arab background are prevented to enter the state. For example, a law passed by the Knesset in 2003 prevents family reunification of couples, in which one partner is a Palestinian from the Palestinian Territories (Citizenship and Entry Into Israel (Temporary Order) Law, 5763-2003). In the case of foreign workers no official recruitment takes place in Arab countries. This line of action prevents any association of foreign workers with the Arab minority. Because the differentiation between Jews and Arabs in Israel is posed along ethnic and not religious lines – Muslim Arabs and Christian Arabs are lumped together as a an opponent minority – recruitment of non-Arab Muslims from Turkey is not considered as jeopardy.

The third dynamic hinders familial association with the Jewish majority. The composition of foreign workers in Israel is characterized by a trend of feminization. According to Israeli family law that follows the Jewish Orthodox interpretation of Jewish legal code (Halacha), the Jewish status of children is determined by the mother, giving a Jewish woman a specific role in the physical preservation of Jewish identity (Prashizky/Remennick 2012). Therefore, children of female foreign workers will always be non-Jewish. This gendered feature one more time clearly divides them from the Jewish majority and prevents fusion and assimilation. Female foreign workers are automatically excluded from one of the main discourses in Israel, namely the demographic concern and cannot take a position on the Palestinian-Jewish/Arab-Jewish axis in principle.

It is important to note that interethnic and interreligious marriages cannot be performed in Israel because of the lack of civil marriage. This way, fraternization between foreign workers and Jewish or Arab population is not possible according to legal circumstances either. Also, conversion to Judaism is out of question, as efforts by foreign workers to convert to Judaism are usually hampered by their employers and religious authorities (Hacker 2009). Moreover, in 2003 the state initiated a law which states that conversions to Judaism, which are performed within Israel cannot be applied to the Law of Return. Although this initiative was rejected by the Israeli Supreme Court, in 2005 the court confirmed the practice of refusing to convert foreign workers by religious tribunals (HCJ 552/04 Gozman v. The state of Israel). This line of action makes sure that foreign workers cannot extend and justify their stay after their working visa is expired and claim a right to achieve the Israeli citizenship.

In summary, the ethno-nationalist structure of Israeli citizenship and the ethno-national dynamics within the Israeli society provide no possibility for assimilation but allow for a separate foreign worker society. Three dynamics – visibility, no official recruitment of Arabs and the focus on women – consolidate strict control of the isolation and temporariness of foreign workers and are guarded by various laws. A threat to the Jewish character of the state is only posed if one of these dynamics are undermined. This theoretically can happen through undocumented migrants, who enter Israel on tourist visa and therefore undermine the recruitment process, intermarriages and conversion, although the last two factors are very unlikely to take place. Undocumented workers, who overstayed they visa, do not pose extra threat towards Israeli ethno-nationalism, as in its framework they cannot escape segregation.

#### 4. State policy towards labor migration – national level

National migration policy in Israel is very limited; providing basic social and health standards for documented foreign workers is regarded as a private matter between the employees and their employers. For undocumented foreign workers, the situation is even worse because official national structures do not recognize them as members of society or potential customers of the welfare agencies (Rosenhek 2002).

Israeli officials authorize private Israeli companies to find potential workers abroad; however as soon as

they enter Israel, neither social nor political organizations feel responsible for them. This exclusionary policy tries to prevent any possibility of foreign workers being granted social rights. Therefore, it denies any kind of expression of legitimate claims against the state, fearing that otherwise, as in the case of the Western welfare systems it might lead to the transformation of their status from 'foreign workers' to 'denizens' with access to welfare and other social resources. It is rather a policy of non-representation than representation.

In this sense, like any other industrialized country, Israel faces the problem of being dependent on foreign labor on the one side, but not fancying the idea of foreigners gaining citizenship on the other side. Nevertheless, the history of labor migration shows that ideology and reality often differ. As Philip Martin put it in his 'iron law of labor immigration: There is nothing more permanent than temporary workers' (Martin 1994).

Since 2002, the Israeli government pursues a harsh policy of deportation of undocumented foreign workers in order to reduce their number and demonstrate its own resoluteness (Sinai 2002). Yet, the increase in the share of foreign workers with permits in the past years seems to indicate that the government has only partially upheld its declared policies. Its actions simply contradict the idea of getting rid of foreign workers.

This can be seen by taking a look at the core players of Israeli labor migration system who obviously do not act in accordance with the publicly declared goals. Private employers and manpower agencies have not changed their preference for cheap foreign labor and continue to recruit even larger numbers of workers from abroad than they actually need. A lot of workers themselves are ready to pay big amounts of money to recruiters in hope to get to Israel and many of them want to stay permanently. The implicit non-involvement of Israeli officials already on the stage of the recruitment process opens the door for criminal actions, such as widespread exploitation and human trafficking.

National policy towards labor migration is characterized by the conspicuous disengagement of governmental officials from direct involvement in the recruitment of foreign workers, i.e. they are provided with almost no social and health services, their working conditions are not inspected; labor laws with respect to foreign workers cannot be effectively enforced. There is a strong emphasis on making the residence of foreign workers temporary and trying to place client politics

behind the veil. The client politics involves the allocation of employer subsidies, quota setting and working permits (Kemp 2010). Quotas for employment permits in the key sectors are updated on a regular basis. This results in the government being accused of practicing a so-called 'revolving door' policy (offering new permits despite deporting people), with manpower agencies as its main profiteers.

After allocating employment permits to employers in accordance with the quotas in each sector, manpower agencies in Israel contact recruitment agencies in sending countries, which are instructed to find suitable workers. As soon as such workers are found abroad, their details are transferred to the Ministry of the Interior, which is responsible for the admission of foreign workers into the country (Kemp 2010).

Several reports published on the recruitment process show that foreign workers are subject to exploitation, both abroad and in Israel. Private recruitment agencies abroad charge workers illegally high fees, ranging from around USD 5,000 paid by domestic caregivers from the Philippines up to USD 25,000 paid by Chinese construction workers.

It has been estimated that a domestic care-giver from the Philippines would need to work in Israel for about nine months, whereas a Chinese construction worker would have to stay for at least two years on average in order to cover the costs related to their high recruitment fees which they will have to pay upon their return. Moreover, upon their arrival in Israel, foreign workers are likely to suffer from severe violation of their rights.

The aspects of the national policy are particularly rigorous when it comes to pregnancy of foreign workers and, as a result, the upbringing of the children born in the country (Hacker 2009). Demography is a highly politicized topic in Israel. Hence, it is common to hear statements made by politicians that demonstrate their awareness of the long-term consequences associated with the birth and education of 'foreign' children on Israeli soil. In 2000 Interior Minister Eli Yishai (from the religious Shas party) told the Knesset, 'They have to be deported before they become pregnant' (quoted in Kemp 2007). An official statement from the Ministry of the Interior from the late 1990s reads as follows, 'If the foreign children learned Israel's heritage in our schools, we would make them feel as if they were part of us. It would be better if those children didn't go to school and watched TV all day instead' (quoted in Rosenhek 2002).

All these procedures refer both to documented and undocumented foreign workers. As a consequence, the limitations in their societal position are crucial.<sup>5</sup>

### 5. Municipal policy – Tel Aviv’s urban citizenship on the local level

To prevent the possibility of the settlement of foreign workers, the government instituted a strict, exclusionary labor migration policy. This policy resulted in a very high proportion of undocumented foreign workers, many of them living their ‘invisible’ lives in Tel Aviv (Alexander 2007).

Tel Aviv has developed a local policy toward its foreign worker population, thus adopting a more liberal policy. This process can be seen as a pragmatic response of the municipality to the problems posed by a large presence of undocumented foreign workers within an exclusionary national labor migration system. However, Tel Aviv’s response also reveals a gradual change in attitudes and expectations within the local authority towards these non-Jewish newcomers. Therefore, the question arises: “to what extent have the host-stranger relations in Tel Aviv deviated from those at the national level?” (Alexander 2007)

By the late 1990s some communities of undocumented workers from African and South American countries were showing signs of settlement by high number of families with children and also patterns of communal organization. They managed to build up self-help associations as well as cultural clubs and religious networks. Churches which already existed in the area around Tel Aviv became important and pastors with a migrant background became leaders of undocumented groups especially among communities from Africa and the Philippines.

Various rented apartments in southern Tel Aviv functioned as schools and kindergartens. Well known and visible activities like soccer championships and snack stalls organized by immigrants from South America took place in public (Alexander 2007).

In contrast to the communities of undocumented foreign workers, documented foreign workers did not develop formal social organizations. One explanation is lack of motivation: documented foreign workers in Israel regard their stay as temporary. The majority of

them prefer to work long hours and strive for maximum savings. Moreover, the lack of monitoring by state officials keeps them in constant fear of their employers and discourages any form of mobilization. Thus, the Israeli labor migration system led to the situation where undocumented foreign workers enjoy greater freedom than their documented counterparts.

But above all, the benign attitude of most Tel Avivians toward foreign workers is due to the perception (shared by most Israelis, as noted above) that foreign workers constitute a non-threatening substitute for Palestinian workers and that their presence is temporary. This perception of temporariness is constantly being reinforced by government statements and policies that exclude any possibility of settlement for the non-Jewish foreign workers (Alexander 2007).

As their numbers grew, foreign workers were increasingly coming in contact with local service providers. From the mid-1990s onward, a bottom-up practice of informal provision of basic health, welfare and educational services to undocumented foreign workers and especially to their children has started to evolve. By 1995, there have already been two family health clinics in south Tel Aviv which informally provided undocumented foreign workers with a preventive health insurance system. In 1996, these clinics treated 543 migrant families. This practice was tolerated by the director of the city’s Public Health Administration, who later reported it to the deputy mayor. A similar norm developed at the main municipal hospital, where doctors defined ‘emergency treatment’ in a liberal way and extended hospitalization days for uninsured migrants (Alexander 2007).

Social workers in the city’s welfare department also began treating dozens of children of foreign workers in what they defined as ‘critical cases.’ The municipal primary school in the neighborhood called Neve Sha’anán, Bialik School, was another actor. Bialik’s director did not only open the school to migrant children but also provided them with bilingual teachers, for instance. Also, the school received the post facto approval of the director of the city’s Education Division. During this time, most other schools refused to admit children who failed to prove their residence, although this was not consistent with the Israeli law requiring all children to be enrolled despite their legal status.

Since 2000, children of undocumented foreign workers are entitled to health insurance and are subject to compulsory free education in the whole country. Nonetheless, there are certain limitations to their abi-

<sup>5</sup> Kemp et al. (2000) use the term ‘margizens’ to describe the position of foreign workers on the margins of the Israeli society; they are not even ‘denizens’.

lity to exercise their rights. Tel Aviv Municipality has been the most active and straightforward authority in incorporating large number of foreign workers' children, most of whom were undocumented.

These practices were developed as a response of Tel Aviv's municipal workers to the needs of migrants whom they encountered on a daily basis. As a consequence of the lack of any formal municipal policy, these actions were based on their professional ethics and then were approved by their superiors.

However, the administration of Tel Aviv does not present these actions as a step toward extending citizenship for the foreign workers. Instead, the reason for their incorporation is viewed as a 'practical necessity' based on both humanitarian and 'Jewish ethical' grounds (Alexander 2007). This strategy, according to some Israeli civil rights organizations, avoids the real issue behind most of the foreign workers' problems: the exclusionary nature of Israel's ethno-national regime toward all non-Jewish immigrants on the one hand and an economical exploitation of foreigners on the other hand.<sup>6</sup>

## 6. Conclusion

Israel's exclusionary labor migration system continues to reflect the country's ethno-national nature on the one hand, and its dependence on non-citizen labor force on the other. At the same time, the Israeli government has neither stopped the inflows of foreign workers from overseas, nor has it succeeded in being consistent with its declared aim of minimizing the foreign worker population.

On the contrary, it seems that according to recent dynamics in the recruitment process, such as Asianization, non-recruitment from Arab countries and feminization, Israeli ethno-nationalists and the labor migration regime found a convenient situation for coexistence. Within the framework of ethno-nationalism and its immanent dynamic of segregation, foreign workers constitute one "visible" group among others and therefore can be easily recognized and controlled.

<sup>6</sup> The former director of Social Services in Tel Aviv, Zeev Friedman, put the conflicting attitudes of national and local policies into words: "We are talking about a clash of attitudes. The State's attitude is one of deportation, non-recognition of elementary rights. We, on the other hand, claim that there is a certain reality, and as long as these people are among us, a universal morality applies to them that crosses borders and nations" (Ha'aretz, 30.7.2001).

As long as the labor migration regime is following these rules, the labor market can be regularly supplied with workers without challenging the Jewish character of the state.

One can argue that the dynamics of Asianization and feminization of foreign workers can be witnessed in other countries that depend on labor migration, too. Also the fact that recruitment into the Israeli labor market is performed by manpower agencies and not state officials averts the suspicion that these dynamics are politically intended. In any case this development intensifies and consolidates ethno-nationalist structures, even though it is produced by global conditions.

The orientation and actions of some foreign workers in Israel have much in common with those of foreign workers in numerous other destinations around the world. In spite of the initial intention to accumulate savings and return home, some foreign workers have decided that life in Israel is good enough, even in the absence of the secure legal status. Ironically, the conditions of undocumented foreign workers are often better than those of documented foreign workers. Although undocumented foreign workers run the risk of being deported, they are still free to choose their workplace, bargain over work conditions, find their own housing, etc. It is not surprising, therefore, that a high share of foreign workers in Israel are irregular (Alexander 2007). For the labor market, there is no difference if the worker is documented or not, since he continues to take part in it in any case.

A number of government actions and policies are in pursuit of preventing any form of membership of foreign workers in the Israeli society. In contrast to this, Tel Aviv provides both documented and undocumented foreign workers with a minimum of social services on its own account.

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