NOREF
NORWEGIAN PEACEBUILDING RESOURCE CENTRE

Policy Brief
June 2013

Israel's internal frontier: the enduring power of ethno-nationalism

By Cathrine Thorleifsson

Executive summary

This policy brief examines the paradox of Mizrahim (Arab Jews) supporting right-wing Israeli policies through a case study of the border town of Kiryat Shemona. Based on ethnographic research, it illuminates the enduring power of ethno-nationalism and demonstrates how it affects Mizrahi lives. Mizrahim became trapped by Israeli nation-building on the geographic and socioeconomic margins of the state positioned between the dominant Ashkenazi elite and the Palestinian population. Factors such as Mizrahim's partial inclusion in the nation; tensions between Jews and Arabs, and between the secular and the religious; the decline of the welfare state; and a shared perception of threats and dangers informed everyday nationalism in the town. Mizrahim contested Ashkenazi Israeliness through ethnic and transnational identifications and practices. Simultaneously, their support for the nation-in-arms and identification as "strong" and "civilised" reinforced the dominant logic of ethno-nationalism. Mizrahi support for right-wing militarism is likely to persist as long as national unity is used as a colonial practice by the centre. The inclusion of Mizrahim as equals together with other marginalised citizens would necessarily entail an Israeli Spring.

Zionism's internal Other

Together with the ultra-Orthodox, Russian speakers and settlers, Mizrahi[1] residents of the periphery make up the majority of the right-wing constituency in Israel. Why do Mizrahim with ties to the Arab world vote for hawkish political parties and so strongly support the security and army apparatus? One answer can be derived from the interplay of ethnicity, class, and place that creates and sustains the Mizrahi ethno-class.

In order to understand the contemporary character and dynamics of ethno-nationalism related to belonging, one must know the history from which it emerged. The goal of Jewish unity and the desire for a secular Jewish nation state was the founding principle of political Zionism. The Zionist movement was full of Orientalist conceptions of Arab degeneracy and primitiveness. While Jews from Arab and Muslim countries were considered essential members of the nation, they were marked as racially and culturally different from the national identity. After Israeli statehood they were incorporated as "inferior" members of the expanding settling nation. Immigrants who spoke Arabic and followed Arab customs suffered from a policy of cultural erasure. Categorised as Mizrahim, the Arab Jews became Zionism's internal Other.

Their inferior position was further solidified by spatial planning policies. From the beginning of Jewish settlement in Palestine Galilee was considered a frontier by the Zionist leadership. During the 1950s Mizrahi immigrants were placed in peripheral development towns to the north and south for economic, security and settlement reasons. The

1 The term Mizrahi (plural Mizrahim) literally means "Eastern" or "Oriental". Its meaning overlaps with the older term Sephardi. Prior to the emergence of the term Mizrahi, "Arab Jew" was a commonly used description (Shoat, 1988: 27). I have decided to use Mizrahi, as a term that is widely used by modern scholarship and public discourse.

new towns were seen as essential to Israeli security and nation-building efforts. They supplied existing Jewish settlements with cheap labour, populated remote districts in order to prevent the return of the displaced Palestinians and created an internal frontier against perceived hostile neighbouring countries. Mizrahim thus became trapped by Israeli nation-building on the geographic and socioeconomic margins of the state positioned between the dominant Ashkenazi[2] elite and the Palestinian population.

Currently Mizrahim in development towns make up 18% of the Israeli population. The northernmost development town in Israel is Kiryat Shemona, situated near the border with Lebanon in Upper Galilee. Like other Jewish towns and cities, it was built on the ruins of a village in which Palestinians once lived and worked, and from which they were violently expelled. The town of around 25,000 residents is inhabited predominantly by Mizrahim and a Russian-speaking minority. The northern border is only a two-hour drive from Tel-Aviv. However, the town is publicly perceived as a deprived and unsafe place. Kiryat Shemona has been the frequent target of Hizbullah-fired Katyusha rockets, causing fear among its residents. Israeli politicians and media further create a sense of threat, intensifying the sense of living on an exposed frontier.

Starting in the late 1980s, the neoliberal privatisation of state-owned enterprises and the mass immigration of Jews and non-Jews from the former Soviet Union increased unemployment and labour competition. The most notable response by Mizrahim to discrimination and borderland anxieties has been the intensification of their bond with the political right and peripheral forms of ethno-nationalism. The interrelationship between neoliberal reforms and Jewishness was a key factor in the rise of the party and the ethno-religious movement known as Shas[3] that draws most of its electoral support from the peripheral Mizrahi religious lower classes.

Peripheral nationhood

The great identity mission of the Israeli state is to mould all Jews into one nationality. The ethno-national logic promoted through the army, schooling, media and national public events has been central to the creation of cultural uniformity and national identity. In one sense the Zionist "melting pot" policy did succeed, since Jewish immigrants of diverse backgrounds acquired the same language and nationalist values. On another level it failed because Israelis still draw symbolic, material or political resources from ethnic differentiation.

While much has been written about Mizrahi political protest and mobilisation (Shenhav, 2006; Yiftachel, 2006; Chetrit, 2000), less has been said about their processes of self-identification in everyday life. Ethno-nationalism is not only institutionally produced and enforced, but also pinned to and negotiated in the intimate register of neighbourhood, family and household. Based on extensive anthropological fieldwork in Kiryat Shemona from 2007 to 2009, the author identified a particular dynamic of Israeli nationalism that both challenges and sustains dominant nationhood. It can be termed peripheral nationhood, which entails a negotiation of national belonging by "in-between" populations from the margins of the state.

In Kiryat Shemona Mizrahim challenged Ashkenazi secular Israeliness by stressing the importance of religion and morality, ethnic memory, and traditions. At the same time the dominant Euro-civilisational discourse stressing the importance of a shared Western culture shaped social identification in the town. This was particularly evident in the residents' concern about presenting themselves as "civilised" – a shared manifestation of settler colonial societies. Russian-speaking Israelis were accused of possessing doubtful Jewishness and hence weaker national loyalty. Mizrahim distanced themselves from the core of the Israeli structure of cultural/political power through transnational networks and practices, thus bypassing the ideal of rootedness in Zionism. While Mizrahi residents retained symbolic attachments to Arab homelands, they paradoxically expressed anti-Arab sentiments. They used the oriental stereotypes they had been subjected to in their stigmatisation of Arab minority populations to enhance their own social status and self-image. However, these stereotypes were often intrinsic to the Zionist ethnic hierarchy, thus reinforcing Israeli ethno-nationalism.

Making the margins central

Geographical peripheries should not always be considered as marginal. The strategic position of the border Mizrahi ethno-class within the military state and political culture has strengthened post-Lebanon 2006. During the war in Gaza in 2008/09 national politicians, the media and religious leaders created a strong public awareness of Mizrahi-dense border towns facing the Palestinian-fired rockets in a manner that validated their place in the Zionist ethos and army. The deprived Mizrahi ethno-class was symbolically moved from the margins to the centre of a national frontier, thus blurring the image of a periphery.

"We have learned to live with conflict; we have grown *strong*" was an often-made statement. "Strength" as a spoken and behavioural code seemed to counter the tension between Zionism's esteemed valuation of frontier settlements and their actual deprivation. During wartime more emotional energy was invested in the symbols of nationhood. Blue and white Israeli flags appeared on balconies, in streets and in social media profiles. Banners with "We are all IDF" (Israeli Defence Forces) slogans idealised the warrior image of the soldiers and was

2 Ashkenazi Jews (plural Ashkenazim) immigrated to Israel/Palestine from Russia, and eastern and central Europe.
3 Shas is a Hebrew acronym for Sephardi Torah Guardians.

intended to boost their morale. Members of the local *yeshiva* moved their prayer ceremonies from the synagogue out into public space. Special prayers were composed for the abducted soldier Gilad Shalit, thus elevating him to the status of an almost-divine Zionist symbol. Shalit came to embody the sentiments of many Israelis, i.e. the perception that in the area of security the government was not doing enough to safeguard the country's residents.

In ordinary times of insecurity the deep ethno-class divisions in Israeli society created competing claims over Israeliness, while national unity emerged in times of heightened conflict. The subordinate position of Mizrahim, yet their centrality during wartime, might explain why their protests, although consistent, have not been intense and have largely fallen within the legitimate boundaries of Zionist political discourse. Along with Orthodox Jews, the Mizrahim are the new elite soldier in Israel's military and thus a central factor in the militarisation of the country (Levy, 2007). Mizrahim in the periphery hope to improve their status in exchange for their support of the military. Paradoxically, however, the economic costs of warfare lead to their increased marginalisation.

An Israeli Spring?

The qualities that make up peripheral nationhood are likely to persist as long as national unity is applied as a colonial practice by the centre. The current ideological rejection of Arabness makes it impossible for Israel to become integrated within its own region. Despite the multiplicity of cultures and languages in Israel, there is no real multicultural ideology. The equal treatment of all Israeli citizens would necessitate a social and ideological revolution. Open acknowledgment of ethnic and socioeconomic divisions is a prerequisite for the struggle against ethnocracy and the inequalities it produces. The state would need to encourage its citizens' ability to hold multiple and sometimes conflicting narratives. Marginalised citizens, both Jews and non-Jews, must be able to be included in the centre of power. For Mizrahim, the change to a multicultural ideology would mean greater socioeconomic equality, greater incorporation of Arab-Judeo culture and traditions into the national culture, and being treated as equals. The abandonment of ethnocratic ideology would potentially weaken the stigma attached to "Orientals" and produce a shift towards a more inclusive society and future regional reconciliation. This would effectively constitute an "Israeli Spring".

References

Chetrit, Sami Shalom. 2000. "Mizrahi politics in Israel: between integration and alternative." *Journal of Palestine Studies*, 29(4): 51-56.

Levy, Yagil. 2007. *Israel's Materialist Militarism.* Mahwah: Lexington Books.

Shenhav, Yehuda. 2006. *A Postcolonial Reading of Nationalism, Religion and Ethnicity*. Stanford: Stanford University Press.

Yiftachel, Oren. 2006. *Ethnocracy Land and Identity Politics in Israel/Palestine.* Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press.

THE AUTHOR

Cathrine Thorleifsson has a PhD in anthropology from the London School of Economics. She is a senior researcher at the Fafo Institute for Applied International Studies in Oslo, Norway. Her book *Nationalism and the Politics of Fear in Israel: Race and Identity on the Border with Lebanon* will be published in autumn 2013.

NOREF

The Norwegian Peacebuilding Resource Centre
Norsk ressurssenter for fredsbygging

The Norwegian Peacebuilding Resource Centre (NOREF) is a resource centre integrating knowledge and experience to strengthen peacebuilding policy and practice. Established in 2008, it collaborates and promotes collaboration with a wide network of researchers, policymakers and practitioners in Norway and abroad.

Read NOREF's publications on
www.peacebuilding.no and sign up for notifications.

Connect with NOREF on Facebook or
@PeacebuildingNO on Twitter

Email: info@peacebuilding.no - Phone: +47 22 08 79 32