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**Research Report**

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# Israel on the Road to the Orient?

The Cultural and Political Rise of the Mizrahim

*Lidia Averbukh*

The Israeli debate sparked by the manslaughter trial of an IDF soldier over an incident in Hebron in March 2016 reveals an identity dimension as well as an ethical one. The perpetrator – convicted of shooting a Palestinian assailant in the head when he was already lying motionless on the ground – was an “Oriental” Jew, a so-called Mizrahi, thus inserting the event into the context of the internal conflict between Mizrahim and Ashkenazim, the Jews of European origin. In recent years the pendulum has swung towards the originally highly marginalised Mizrahim – who now assert political and cultural leadership and challenge Israel’s “Western” identity. Some of them, like the new activist group *Tor HaZahav*, go as far as openly describing Israel as part of the Middle East, although without elaborating what that would mean concretely. The paradigm shift associated with these developments thus remains an intra-societal phenomenon for the time being. Foreign policy implications, for example for the Israeli-Palestinian conflict or relations with Europe, are not discernible at this stage.

Almost seventy years after the founding of the state of Israel, the nation is still embroiled in identity-shaping processes. Today the Mizrahim play a leading role in these, and increasingly set the country’s cultural and political agenda.

The term “Mizrahim” (Hebrew for “Easterners”) is a modern invention of Israeli society. It encompasses all Jews whose origins lie in the Middle East and North Africa, as distinct from the “European” Ashkenazim: Jews from the Maghreb as well as Persian, Yemeni and Iraqi Jews. When they arrived in Israel in the 1950s and 1960s they did not yet represent a monolithic ethnic or political formation. In fact, a distinct Miz-

rahi ethno-cultural consciousness only emerged in the course of the confrontation with Israel’s European-influenced society.

## Multiple Fields of Conflict

Israel’s Jewish population is roughly half Mizrahi and half Ashkenazi (48 percent and 45 percent respectively), alongside smaller groups such as the Ethiopian Jews. For statistical purposes, the growing numbers of Israelis of mixed Mizrahi/Ashkenazi heritage are recorded by paternal line. On top of the ethnic divide as such, conflicts based on socio-economic, cultural and political differences exist between the two groups.

*Lidia Averbukh is Associate in the research project “Israel and its regional and global conflicts: Domestic developments, security issues and foreign affairs”. The project is located within SWP’s Middle East and Africa Division and is funded by the German Foreign Office.*

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### **Socio-economic gap**

Since they arrived in Israel the Mizrahim have felt socio-economically disadvantaged compared to the Ashkenazim. Israeli sociologists identify three principal factors that contributed to this situation: geographical remoteness from centres of power, a poor economic starting situation and restricted access to education.

The government deliberately settled newly arrived Mizrahim in the structurally underdeveloped periphery thus laying the groundwork for their marginal status. Far from the economic, political and cultural centre of the Greater Tel Aviv, they found themselves excluded from full integration.

The arrival of the Mizrahim divided the Israeli economy into two ethnically defined classes. Ashkenazim rose to join the middle class, while Mizrahi Jews, who often brought craft skills from the more traditional economic structures of the Arab states, mostly became manual workers. This divided labour market was perpetuated by the existence of two separate state education systems. Ashkenazim were able to use secular schools on the Western model as a springboard to higher education, while Mizrahim generally took the vocational route.

Dissatisfaction with their situation led to massive protests by the Mizrahim, the best-known of which are the Wadi Salib riots of 1959 and the Black Panther protests of 1971. In 1997 a group of intellectuals formed Hakeshet Hademokratit Hamizrachit (Mizrahi Democratic Rainbow Coalition) to articulate economic and social demands – for example for jobs, housing and education – and force politicians to address them.

The socio-economic divide between Ashkenazim and Mizrahim is less wide in the second and third generations than in the first. The peripheral transit camps have grown into “development towns” with proper (albeit improveable) infrastructure and better educational opportunities. The establishment of a large number of new colleges increased the proportion of Mizrahim going on to study to 42 percent (2002), almost equivalent to their proportion

of the population as a whole. Even at the universities, which are located largely in the centre of the country, they represented 23 percent of students by 2002.

Although the education gap has narrowed quantitatively, qualitative differences persist. Studies show that the institutions with the lowest prestige and modest standards attract the highest proportions of Mizrahi students, most of whom still come from less-educated milieus. With science and high-tech courses largely attended by Ashkenazim and the Israeli labour market increasingly modern and technological, the ethnic gap persists in these areas.

Nonetheless, since the wave of Russian-speaking and Ethiopian immigration in the 1990s, the Mizrahim have been less obviously socio-economically marginalised. As the latest arrivals took their place in the low-wage sector, a “new Mizrahi middle class” emerged. This is reflected in the findings of the Adva Center, which conducts research into equality and social justice in Israel: In 2015 the pay of “native Israelis of Ashkenazi origin” was 31 percent above the average, and that of Mizrahi 14 percent above average. “Native Israelis from FSU countries” (the former Soviet Union) earned close to average (1 percent above), followed by Arab workers with two-thirds of the average and last of all Ethiopian Israelis earning little more than half the average.

### **Cultural rivalries**

The Zionist policy of the equalising “melting pot”, as Ben Gurion described Israel, set out to create a “new Jew”. Zionism’s goal of uniting the Jewish people in their Biblical homeland was incompatible with the idea of different Jewish identities. So it subsumed them all into the hegemonic European Zionist concept of Jewishness and left no space for other cultural traditions. In the early years, Israeli society rejected the tending of such specific cultures as “sectoralism”. The dominant Ashkenazi elite with its sophisticated, Europeanised

culture also viewed Mizrahi culture as primitive.

The Mizrahim arrived in a Western-leaning and anti-Arab Israel. The reasons for this are to be found in the anti-Arab stance of the currents that dominated politics and cultural life and in Israel's geopolitical situation and ongoing conflict with the Arab states. In order to gain acceptance in Israel, first-generation Mizrahim largely avoided displaying their culture in public. In fact, many even adopted European-sounding names in order to avoid appearing "primitive" and to escape suspicions of illloyalty. And they also sought to avoid speaking their own language, usually Arabic, and cultivating their traditions in fields such as food and music.

The growing hostility exhibited towards Israel by their countries of origin strengthened Mizrahi identification with their new – and now only – home. This geographical proximity to the Arab world and culture combined with a simultaneous compulsion to reject it publicly placed the Mizrahim in a schizophrenic situation. Work on the history of the Oriental Jews conducted by researchers from the Rainbow Coalition prepared the ground to address this dilemma of Mizrahi identity. The second and third generations now demanded equality between the Oriental Jewish culture and the predominant Ashkenazi.

### **Political differences**

Mizrahi protests ultimately led to tangible political consequences in 1977, with the victory of Likud over the Labour Party (HaAvoda) 1977. The historic election upset, for which the Hebrew neologism "mahapakh" was coined, ended the era of Ashkenazi political hegemony. The Labour Party, which had consolidated the privileged position of the Ashkenazim, was blamed for marginalising the Mizrahim in the early decades. The relationship between Mizrahi voters and Likud (which has never itself in fact been led by Mizrahim), can be characterised as paternalistic and clientel-

ist. Its leaders see themselves as the voice of the Mizrahim.

The spectrum of religious parties contains some representing Ashkenazi, and others representing Mizrahi interests. Rabbi Ovadia Yosef, who died in 2013, was spiritual leader of the ultra-Orthodox Mizrahi and founded the Shas Party in 1984. Although its ideas diverge from those of the largely traditionally religious Mizrahi voters, Shas has succeeded in corralling the Mizrahi electorate by emphasising their shared roots. The Ashkenazi ultra-Orthodox equivalent is United Torah Judaism. Because Mizrahim tend to vote for religious and nationalist parties like Shas and Likud, they are attributed firm ideological positions opposing the secularism and liberalism of left-of-centre parties that tend to be supported by Ashkenazi voters. There is statistical support for this assertion.

Accordingly, in the two central issues of Israeli politics – the treatment of religion and the Israeli-Palestinian conflict – most of the Mizrahim lean towards positions contrary to those of the majority of the Ashkenazim. In fact, however, it is by no means certain that these are entirely substantive differences. Many Mizrahim might potentially support more moderate positions if they did not associate the left-of-centre parties with the Ashkenazi establishment.

### **A New Mizrahi Course in Culture and Politics**

Since the turn of the century the conflict between Mizrahim and Ashkenazim has been about more than one ethnic group's advantages over another. Increasingly, it also concerns the country's future self-image and as such its political leadership and positioning as "Western" or "Eastern". The process of "Orientalisation" – or in Israeli terms of "Mizrahisisation" – is in full swing, as manifested in the current identity debates and in popular culture. Political parties have accommodated the trend by gradually granting greater attention to the concerns of the Mizrahim. At the same time

new Mizrahi organisations and networks are emerging, aiming to become the new elite.

#### Religious attitudes (2014/2015)

##### *Mizrahim*

- 11% don't believe in God
- 32% identify as Hiloni (secular)
- 42% identify as Masorti (traditional)
- 18% identify as Dati (religious)
- 8% identify as Haredi (ultra-Orthodox)
- 49% believe that religion should be separate from government policies (as do 70% of Ashkenazim)

##### *Ashkenazim*

- 35% don't believe in God
- 66% identify as Hiloni (secular)
- 15% identify as Masorti (traditional)
- 8% identify as Dati (religious)
- 12% identify as Haredi (ultra-Orthodox)

#### National attitudes (2014/2015)

55% of *Mizrahim* say that Jews should remain in Israel, even if it means giving up the good life  
(as do 39% of Ashkenazim)

56% of *Mizrahim* say that Israeli Arabs should be expelled or transferred from Israel  
(as do 40% of Ashkenazim)

48% of *Mizrahim* say that settlements on the West Bank help Israel's security  
(as do 35 % of Ashkenazim)

Source: Pew Research Center, *Israel's Religiously Divided Society*, March 8, 2016, <http://www.pewforum.org/files/2016/03/Israel-Survey-Full-Report-03-01-EMBARGO.pdf>

#### A general "Orientalisation" in society

A growing societal recognition of Judaism's Oriental cultural and identity-forming attributes can currently be observed. This development is associated with an increasingly active "new Mizrahim", who include artists,

students, journalists and other intellectuals. They are leaders of the Mizrahim second and third generations, whose socio-economic advancement lends them greater self-confidence than their parents' generation. The proponents of the new Mizrahi activism embed their vision of a "Middle Eastern" Israeli society in what are often traditionalistic and reactionary ideas.

At the same time, the process of "Orientalisation" is also driven – in a different context – by the new generation of Ashkenazi leftists. They welcome the "rediscovery" of Judaism's Oriental roots because that fits with their ideas of peaceful co-existence within the Arab region. Young Ashkenazim also exhibit solidarity with the Mizrahim. The frame of a post-Zionist discourse that has jettisoned the idea of the melting pot supplies encouragement to anything associated with folklore, Jewish identities and alternative traditions. Ideologically, this Ashkenazi "Orientalism" remains foreign to most Mizrahim, even if they undoubtedly benefit from it in the sense of a general improvement in their situation.

The most striking manifestations of "Orientalisation" can be observed in popular culture. In recent years Israeli television has broadcast three successful series addressing discrimination and stereotyping of the Mizrahim: "Zaguri Imperia" (2014), "'Arsim' and 'Frechot': The New Elites" (2014) and "Achlu li, Shatu li: The Next Generation" (2016). They raise issues such as emulation of Ashkenazim and the pejorative terms used to describe Mizrahim ("Ars" and "Frecha" being the male and female equivalents of "chav"). Oriental music and Mizrahi poetry are also gaining in popularity. The Mizrahi poetry group "Ars Poetica", for example, enjoys similar fame to popstars. The cultural "Orientalisation" has reached the Israeli mainstream.

#### "Orientalisation" of the political agenda

The governing coalition of Likud and HaBait HaYehudi (The Jewish Home) has added

Mizrahi issues to its agenda, instrumentalising them for political ends. In June 2016 Benjamin Netanyahu ordered a new investigation into the Yemenite Children Affair, in which between 1948 and 1954 children of Yemeni immigrants are alleged to have been kidnapped and adopted by Ashkenazi families, often childless Holocaust survivors. Mizrahi activists assert that the purpose was to “de-Arabise” the “backward” Oriental Jews.

The accusation is directed at the government of the time, which was led by the traditionally Ashkenazi Labour Party. The allegations have been very persistent, and form a narrative passed from generation to generation within the Yemeni community. Whether the new investigation confirms that the elites at the time knew what was occurring, or like earlier probes fails to do so, the discussion does nothing to narrow the rift between Mizrahim and Ashkenazim. Any proof of an “Ashkenazi conspiracy” would devastate an already weak opposition and drive votes to Likud.

Culture Minister Miri Regev has launched several initiatives to end Ashkenazi hegemony in the cultural institutions. One means to this end is the diversion of state spending into Mizrahi cultural projects.

In 2016 Education Minister Naftali Bennett established a committee to improve the representation of Oriental Jewish culture and history in the education system. Chaired by the Mizrahi author Erez Biton, the committee proposed for example adding texts by Mizrahi intellectuals such as Jacques Derrida to the school curriculum and organising school trips to Spain and Morocco (like those already running to Poland). Oriental Jewish school students whose ancestors were driven out of Spain to North Africa will be given the opportunity to visit the historical Jewish sites there. At home, the Mizrahi Jews’ history of pogroms and expulsions is to be given greater weight in the collective consciousness, which has until now been defined above all by the suffering of the Ashkenazi Jews.

### **New activism: Tor HaZahav – Torenu**

The contemporary Mizrahi protest movement’s desire for a “Mizrahisisation” of Israel as a whole is illustrated especially clearly by the group Tor HaZahav (The Golden Age), which formed in early 2016. For the group’s supporters and activists Israel is neither a European enclave in the Middle East, nor “a villa in the jungle”, as Ehud Barak once put it. Instead, they see their country as an integral part of the region. In their eyes Israel stands within the natural continuum of the region’s Jewish history. Referencing the legendary medieval Jewish flourishing on the Iberian peninsula, when Jews and Arabs coexisted in prosperity, they seek to ring in a new “Golden Age”.

Their assertion that their Zionism is “not only the Zionism of the kibbutzim and the Palmach” refers to the elitism shared by the “socialist islands” in the desert and the paramilitary fighting force. Both were historical manifestations of the European Jewish vision of Israel. “The Zionism of Tor HaZahav is the Zionism of Mizrahi factory and construction workers, whose hands created Israel’s cities, its prosperity, and its authentic Israeli culture.” This statement refers to Mizrahi marginalisation in the labour market and the settlement of Mizrahi Jews in the periphery. Tor HaZahav understands “authentic culture” as the region’s Oriental culture, in contrast to the imported and seemingly artificial European culture.

About sixty activists form the core of Tor HaZahav. Many of them are already well-known as artists or leaders of other Mizrahi protest movements. Although they come from the new Mizrahi middle class, they seek to reach marginalised groups by stressing their Mizrahi identity. The group’s website lists a series of demands addressed to Israeli politics and society: improving living conditions in the periphery in the interests of equality, full participation in official status markers (Mizrahim on banknotes, in street names and as recipients of official awards), and satisfactory resolution of the Yemenite Children Affair. But the most striking de-

mand is for the immediate “integration of Israel in the Middle East”, by nurturing Oriental history, language, tradition and culture.

The activists from Tor HaZahav see a connection between the Mizrahi/Ashkenazi constellation within Israel and Israel’s conflict with its neighbours. They believe that the road to peace and normalisation will be smoother once Israel has recognised itself as part of the Middle East and established a traditional – Oriental-rooted – political elite. The suffix “Torenu” in the movement’s name (Hebrew for “our turn now”) represents a challenge to the Ashkenazi elites.

So on the one side the activists are pushing for equality in a hierarchical Ashkenazi-dominated society and see themselves entering the ranks of the decision-makers. On the other, they want to demonstrate that the rich history of Mizrahi culture and ideas possesses the potential to create a new ideological foundation for Israeli society. However, the rudimentary nature of their political ideas creates an impression that Tor HaZahav is in fact simply riding on a wave of broader social change.

## Conclusions and Outlook

The “Orientalisation” or “Mizrahisisation” of Israeli society is a long-term trend, which has been driven by waves of Mizrahi protest and finally consolidated in recent years. The paradigm shift – turning away from a Western orientation and towards Oriental origins – can be recognised in four political fields:

*Society:* The Mizrahim’s transformation from marginalised group to central political force has brought with it a substantial expansion of their influence. Today they hold the upper hand over the Ashkenazim, as the determining factor for Israel’s identity and cultural alignment. Mizrahim have thus come to dominate the gradual process of consolidating an overall Israeli identity.

Their active participation in this process is conditioned not least by their stronger ties to the state of Israel, which is their only

possible homeland. For Israelis of European origin, who are often also citizens of a Western state and maintain a transnational ethos through socialisation and education, the bond with Israel is less tight and less exclusive. Consequently it is Mizrahim who today define Israeliness and consciously and unconsciously invest more in the new Israeli identity.

Social tensions continue to exist between the two groups. In particular Ashkenazim draw accusations of intra-Jewish racism when they criticise the rise of the Mizrahi. So instead they do so indirectly, scapegoating the Mizrahim for all the defects of Israeli society. Mizrahim in turn complain that they still experience structural discrimination.

Both these perspectives were on display in the debate over the manslaughter prosecution of Elor Azaria, who shot and killed a Palestinian assailant – lying motionless on the ground – in March 2016 in Hebron. Ashkenazi journalists saw the incident as a “typical” case of Mizrahi violence and brutality, while Mizrahi reporters accused the Ashkenazi judiciary and generals of conducting a witchhunt against a member of the Mizrahi group. Mizrahim and Ashkenazim do not find it easy to argue constructively. At the same time, the incident has made anti-Ashkenazi rhetoric acceptable among Mizrahi activists.

*Party politics:* The run-up to the next elections is highly likely to reveal and reflect the growing significance of the Mizrahim. Left-wing parties can also be expected to give list places to candidates with Mizrahi roots and to take up their socio-economic and cultural concerns. In the longer term the “Mizrahisisation” of party politics could endanger the monopoly Shas currently holds over ethnic representation. With the Mizrahim demonstrating a new, strengthened self-confidence, the image of the Mizrahi underdog is no longer a decisive reason to vote for a particular political party.

Tor HaZahav has not yet the potential to become a political party before the next

elections, but its representatives could alternatively stand as candidates for existing parties. Because the group has to date only spoken concretely about domestic politics it can currently – in the tradition of “Israeli escapism” – be placed in the centre ground. As such, it would join Yesh Atid and Kulanu in avoiding the Middle East conflict in order to attract voters in the centre ground who are tired of the problem. In so doing, Tor HaZahav would still be leaving most of the Mizrahi voters – who traditionally vote for security – to Likud. This would exacerbate the fragmentation of the centre and attract more votes from the left than the right.

*Middle East conflict:* The Mizrahim/Ashkenazim constellation has not to date had any identifiable effects on the Middle East conflict, despite its instrumentalisation in domestic power struggles. Ophir Toubul, driving force behind Tor HaZahav, explicitly blames the “white, left-wing Ashkenazim” for the failure of the peace process. By adopting the position of the “outsider” in the Middle East, as secular Europeans in the Levant, he says, they drove a wedge between Mizrahim and Arab. In fact, he argues, the two groups should actually understand each other on the basis of their shared spirituality and holy sites. These statements reflect a widespread Mizrahi belief that the Ashkenazi elites are to blame for the expulsion of the Palestinians, the wars, the occupation and the stagnation of the peace process.

However, although the “new Mizrahim” present themselves as the better mediators of the Middle East conflict and emphasise the roots they share with the Arabs, they have to date concentrated exclusively on consolidating their own position in Israeli society and on its “Mizrahisisation”. The identity discourse thus offers a population weary of conflict a platform to discuss the “Arab” within Judaism, but without forcing them to interact with their immediate Palestinian neighbours – nor with the Arab citizens of Israel itself. At the same time there is no sign of Palestinian leaders preferring

Mizrahi partners over Askenazi. Israel’s “Orientalisation” or “Mizrahisisation” thus has no discernible effect on the Middle East conflict, but serves the Mizrahim as a point of reference for domestic political battles.

*Relations with Europe:* To date there is no indication of the “Mizrahisisation” of Israel’s political elites interfering with Israeli-European relations. Even in the past, European cultural identification with the Ashkenazi leadership was no guarantee of political consensus. Emphasis on shared values has generally been more important for European decision-makers than for their Israeli counterparts. For the latter, relations with Europe have generally been interest-driven. Here the domestic Israeli paradigm shift is unlikely to cause much change. Economic relations – where Europe is Israel’s most important trading partner – and security cooperation will continue to define the relationship.

Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu has recently spoken of a turn towards Arab neighbours seeking large-scale regional cooperation. European decision-makers should not misinterpret such statements as manifestations of domestic “Orientalisation”, but treat them as realpolitik.

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