



HUMAN AGENCY IN IMMIGRANT  
INTEGRATION POLICIES – THE CASE OF ISRAEL

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## 1. Introduction

The State of Israel was established in 1948. In the three years following its independence, from 1948 to 1951, 700,000 Jewish refugees from Europe and from Middle Eastern countries immigrated in Israel, doubling its population. Mass migration continued steadily with the ascent of Jews from Europe, North Africa, the Middle East and more. It slowed down in the 1970s. The collapse of the USSR and the arrival in Israel of a million former Soviet Jews in the 1990s revived immigration (Berthomière 2003; Orni et Efrat 1973; Efrat 1988). The fifty first years of the State, Jewish immigration accounted for 40% of the total population growth (Castles, Haas, et Miller 1998). Jewish immigration to Israel is enabled by its ethno-nationalist policy ‘the Law of Return’. This policy can be compared to the ones granting rights of return for non-resident nationals as it has been the case in Germany or in Greece (Scioldo-Zurcher et Hily 2013). Since the 1950s, the ‘Law of Return’ allows Jews of the Diaspora to be granted immediate citizenship at their arrival in Israel. As stated by the Israeli sociologists Gershon Shafir and Yoav Peled, “[the Law of Return] became the most important legal expression of Israel’s self definition as a Jewish state. It established ethno-nationalist citizenship that, in principle, encompassed all Jews, and only Jews, by virtue of their ethnic descent” (Shafir & Peled in Semyonov et Lewin-Epstein 2004). Israel immigration policy has implications in different sectors. The politico-legal dimension is clear as newcomers of Jewish ascendancy are immediately granted the right to vote and to be elected. However, Asian and African Jews suffered from a lower political representation for decades (Bensimon 1970; Gradus 1983; Khazzoom 2005; Shama et Iris 1977; Yiftachel 1998; Yiftachel 2000). The socio-economic dimension involves a variety of integration policies, for instance to enhance the position of the newcomers on the labor market. The cultural dimension is also tackled through language learning but also a much deeper attempt to federate a multicultural mosaic of immigrants into the Israeli nation (Golden 2001). The spatial dimension has been the object of intense policymaking and policy implementation focusing on the dispersal of immigrants in peripheral areas, notably along the new borders (Kellerman 1996; Khazzoom 2005; Lipshitz 1991; Shama et Iris 1977; Efrat 1988; Berthomière 2003; Kimmerling 1982; Yiftachel 1998). One can see that this apparently unique immigration policy is in fact a multifaceted policy which has been translated in different programs along dimensions as I just mentioned, but also over time (Efrat 1988; Mesch 2002; Shama et Iris 1977). Indeed, since the end of the 1970s, Israel witnessed a radical change in the political rationalities and the policy frames when the right wing party *Likud* accessed the Government in 1977. The new political majority led to the withdrawal of the national State in many sectors as well as to budget restrictions. Local governments were pressed to be more active and a *de facto* decentralization took place (Auerbach 2001; Ben-Elia 2006; Elazar 1988; Razin 2003). This had implications to immigration policies. Indeed, from the end of the 1970s onward, new immigrants receive financial support for the first months of their residence, and then have to find housing and jobs through informal networks (Mesch 2002).

Two main assumptions emerge from this brief introduction. First, Israel is a country where immigration is fundamental to nation building and is based on an ethno-nationalist migration policy. Second, the last

three decades, this country – highly centralized - experienced a *de facto* decentralization. In this context, I decided to focus on the local policies for the economic integration of Jewish immigrants in peripheral Israel. Allow me to define the different terms I just used: By local policies, I mean policies that are designed by the local government, which in the case of Israeli cities is the municipality. Here, I therefore acknowledge that the local government is a policymaker. This shift - from national immigration policies to local integration policies - has been explained as the result of: new international immigration patterns which obliged the State to define the position of immigrants in the society (Martiniello et Rath 2010; Vertovec 2007); decentralization policies; and globalization processes (Glick Schiller et Salazar 2013; Sassen 2005; Taylor and Leitner in Sheppard et McMaster 2008; Soysal 2012). For the concept of integration, I build on the abundant literature on citizenship and nation-state (Castles 2005; Cresswell 2006; Martiniello et Rath 2010; Sassen 2005; Yuval-Davis 2006), and add to it a twist of socio-anthropology of institutions (Bellier 1997; Olivier de Sardan 2010). I believe that integration policy is to be understood as a strategy for policymakers to define who is a member in the making, and moreover, who is a strategic member in the making – meaning who will contribute best to the city, who is a “desirable” newcomer. Economic integration is to be understood as the inclusion of new immigrants in the local economic fabric, and not as a simple measure of accession to an occupation on the local labour market. New immigrants are members of the Jewish Diaspora who benefited from the Law of Return. I therefore exclude from the analysis non-Jewish immigrants (although, I keep it in mind as a certain amount of immigrants who benefited from the Law of Return are not necessarily Jewish (Lustick 1999) and therefore might encounter a different treatment “at the counter”). By peripheral Israel, I mean that I will focus on cities and towns planned for the absorption of immigrants in the first stages of the State in the peripheral districts: Northern district, Southern district and Haifa district.

## **2. Theoretical approaches**

What led me to focus on local integration policies? Allow me to go back to the existing theoretical and empirical approaches.

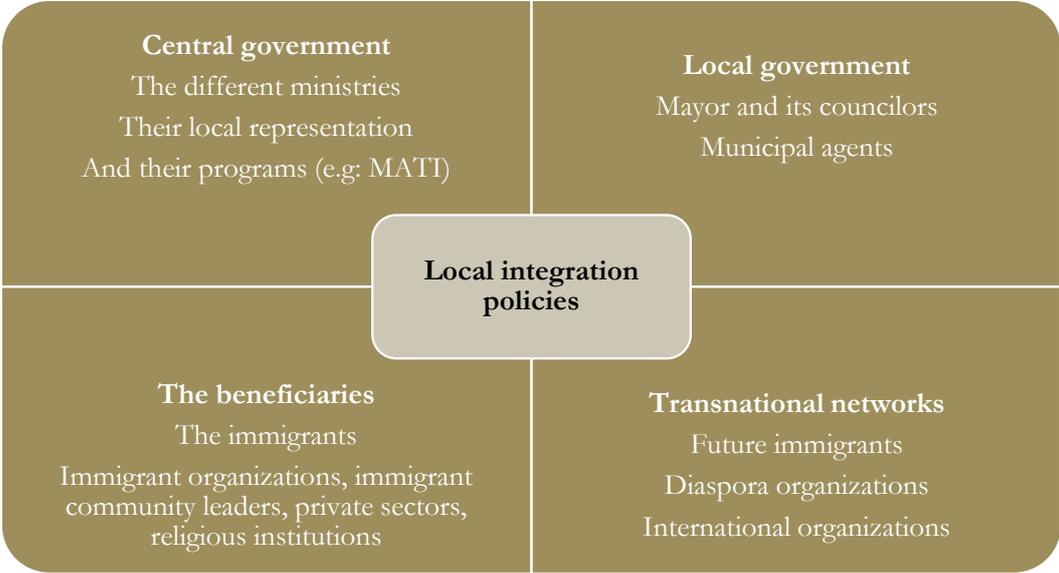
The emergence of the field of immigration policy research coincides with the publication of the article of Gary Freeman “Modes of Immigration Politics in Liberal Democratic States”. Freeman aimed at explaining the gap between the discourse toward immigration – generally restrictive – and the reality – large intakes of immigrants in industrialized countries (Freeman 1995). After Freeman, the ‘control gap’ was the object of intense research. Scholars tackled this issue through the observation of migration policymaking in European and North American countries. Some agreed that politicians were the determinant policymakers (Freeman 1995; Schuck 2007; Bonjour 2011), some that institutions were much more determinant (Boswell 2007; Guiraudon in Martiniello et Rath 2010), and some acknowledged the influence of other organized groups’ advocacy. A second dimension of the immigration policymaking’s debate is to determine the variables impacting different policy responses. The control gap is not an issue, but rather the differences between different countries, and moreover, different cities. Empirical works led

to complex analytical frameworks taking into account historical and institutional legacies; formal and non formal actors; national and local Political Opportunity Structures; as well as economic and political macro-developments (Penninx et al. 2004; Zincone, Penninx, et Borkert 2011). The last dimension of the debate – and the one that interests me the most – is to determine the scales of decision. The first set of research focuses on the national scale. However, more and more, cities are at heart and various works analysing European cities’ policy responses were showcased (Alexander 2003; Penninx et al. 2004; Jørgensen 2012). The emergence of cities as determinant players is usually intertwined with supranational institutions’ policies as well as the role of transnational networks (Caglar 2006; Sassen 2005; Leitner in Sheppard et McMaster 2008; Favell in Martiniello et Rath 2010). If I follow the three dimensions of the immigration policymaking’s debate I mentioned, I assume that politicians are at heart of the policymaking process, nevertheless, the municipal agents will also contribute to the interpretation of policies into programs and working procedures. I assume that all variables explaining variations of policy responses might be relevant, but I would add to it another variable: the understanding that immigrants can be leveraged to increase local resources. Finally, I took the municipality as a central player but I will try and look if it is indeed relevant.

What I suggest is that in a context of decentralization and competition over scarce resources, municipalities might design different policy responses toward new immigrants depending on their leaders’ appreciation that immigrants can be potential leverage for local economic development - as workers, as employers or as nodes of transnational networks. More specifically, I decided to focus on local leaders – mayors and councilors in municipalities - and municipal agents as central actors for integration policymaking in Israel.

**3. Methodological implications**

The arena I chose to study looks like this:



My entry point is the municipality: on the one hand, the political leaders – mayor and councilors; and on the other hand, the operating arm - the municipal agents. The municipality is still very dependent on the



central government and the different offices representing this central government on the municipal territory: e.g. the local branch of the Ministry of Immigration and Absorption, an employment program supervised by the Ministry of Economy and more. The municipality serves the immigrants, and is either cooperating or competing with immigrant organizations. The municipality is also tied to international networks notably

Diaspora networks, philanthropic funds and other international organizations active at local levels in Israel (e.g. the Jewish agency - and its program Partnership2gether - or The American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee).

In this constellation, there could be two different attitudes a municipality can adopt (with a full range of grey): A “proactive municipality” will be the one looking at new immigrants as future voters, future workers, and already transnational actors. This type of municipality will certainly conduct outreaching activities to attract immigrants that in its eyes will be “contributing members”. Once immigrated, this municipality will develop post-immigration activities toward the inclusion of immigrants in the local economic fabric. In order to fund these activities, it could leverage the presence of new immigrants and raise funds at national and transnational levels, in public, private and philanthropic institutions. On the opposite of the spectrum, the “laissez-faire municipality” (which could be the norm in a centralized country like Israel) might look at new immigrants as a social burden, a threat to the local social cohesion, and a threat to the current political balance. It might adopt a passive or even a negative behavior toward settlements of new families. National transfers will be the privileged source of funding for the integration of new immigrants.

In order to select cities for my field research, I reviewed statistical reports as well as realized a short phone survey in municipal integration departments of cities located in the three peripheral districts I mentioned earlier. I brought together four kinds of variables: geographical settings; historical and political trajectories; demographic and economy; adapted human and social resources. I selected cities similar in the urban hierarchy of Israel. Two cities were clearly development towns while two – although they welcomed immigrants – had a different role at the establishment of the State. I try to diversify cities in term of their economic status and their populations mix. Finally, I looked at cities with different human resources’ investment toward the integration of immigrants. Fieldwork will occur in the following four cities:

Acre is located in the Northern District, north of Haifa city. It has a population of 46,300 inhabitants, 18% of them being immigrants who arrived in Israel after the 1990s. Most immigrants come from the Former Soviet Union (FSU). The municipality’s mayor, Mr. Shimon Lancry, belongs to the political party “Heart to the immigrants”. Since its first election in 2004, he significantly increased the activity of the

municipality toward immigrant absorption. An independent department constituted of four staff members exists in the municipality. Acre is a mixed city: Part of its population is Arab-Israeli. My hypothesis is that ideology and politics greatly influenced Acre's recent engagement in immigrant absorption as well as its new positioning as a city for immigrants.

Arad is located in the Southern District, south of Beer Sheba city. Arad was established as a development town in the fifties. 38% of its 23,400 inhabitants are immigrants who arrived in Israel after the 1990s. Represented groups are FSU immigrants as well as Ethiopian immigrants. Ms. Tali Ploskov, an immigrant who arrived from Moldova in 1991, is the mayor of the city. Five staff members work at the department for Aliyah and absorption of the municipality. I argue that the historical context as well as the status of the leader – herself an immigrant – might greatly influence immigration policymaking in the city.

Kiryat Shmona is located in the Northern District, in the extreme north of the Galilee. Kiryat Shmona was established as a development town in the fifties and its role has been to absorb new immigrants – mainly from North Africa and Middle East countries. 23,100 persons reside in Kiryat Shmona, 16% of them are immigrants who arrived in Israel after the 1990s. Recent immigrants are mainly FSU immigrants. The mayor of the city, Mr. Nissim Malka, does not emphasize



immigration in its political program. Therefore, the deputy mayor – himself from Russia – took over this issue and holds the Aliyah and absorption portfolio of the municipality. He coordinates one municipal staff. This “laissez-faire” attitude might be the result of a negative attitude toward new immigration: Kiryat Shmona has traditionally welcomed Sephardic immigrants of low socio-economic level and might therefore consider immigrants as a welfare burden rather than a lever for economic development.



Kiryat Gat is located in the Southern District, north of the Negev desert. North African Jews established it in the 1950s as a development town. 47,400 persons reside in Kiryat Gat, 27% being new immigrants, mainly from the former USSR and Ethiopia. Mr. Aviram Dahari leads the municipality. The deputy mayor, Ms. Shulamit Sahalo is herself an immigrant from Ethiopia. Despite the large number of immigrants, the Aliyah department does not benefit from a visibility on the city's website or other communication tools. The National Bureau of Statistics has ranked Kiryat Gat as a low economic status city. It receives high transfer from the central government (more than a third of its budget) and dedicates a large share of its budget to welfare.



Kiryat Gat was also selected for its 'laissez-faire' attitude toward new immigrants.

#### **4. Conclusion**

First of all, and as my title suggested, I want to identify if and how the role of local leaders is determinant through portraits of local figures. Each city may reveal different kind of leaders who put the integration of immigrants at the top or at the bottom of their agenda, and this for various reasons. Second, I think a crucial step is the moment when a policy is converted into a program. Therefore, it is essential to look at policymaking with the council and compare it to observation “at the counter”. I will analyze the role and the position of the director of the municipal integration department, but also I will conduct focus groups with municipal agents. Finally, I will compare strategic plans and activity reports in order to understand the space occupied by “integration talks” in the council versus the space it actually takes in terms of human resources, budget and time. Finally, the municipality belongs to a larger arena. I will try and understand the role of other players in the local arena, through close encounters with local representatives and the realization of their portraits.

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