Title?

A key article in the field of Israel Studies seeks to answer the question whether Israel, due to its self-definition as a “Jewish and democratic state,” constitutes a unique case among the world’s democracies, due to the tension, if not the contradiction, between these two components – or whether other analogous instances can be found. Alexander Yakobson, a political scientist from the Hebrew University who authored the article, found various European countries that also grant precedence to their respective ethnic majority groups.[[1]](#footnote-1) In another popular article in the field of Israel Studies, sociologist Sammy Smooha examined the same issue. Unlike Yakobson, however, Smooha reached the conclusion that Israel indeed represents an exceptional model that he dubbed “ethnic democracy.”[[2]](#footnote-2) While the two authors diverge in their conclusions, they both chose to compare Israel to Europe, rather than to its immediate geographical environ: the Middle East (although, at least in terms of official definitions, both Lebanon and Turkey are also democracies).

The academic tendency to isolate Israel from its geographical context, and to examine and analyze it primarily by reference to the West, is no coincidence. The manner in which Israel is perceived as an exception in its geographical and cultural context was most powerfully expressed by former Prime Minister Ehud Barak (1999-2001), who famously defined the country as “a villa in the jungle.”[[3]](#footnote-3) This term depicts Israel as an isolated Western bastion embodying values of enlightenment and progress in the heart of a backward region. While Barak’s phraseology may have been unsubtle, his approach has solid roots in Zionist thought. A famous quote in Zionist visionary Theodor Herzl’s *Jewish State* declares that: “We should there form a part of a wall of defense for Europe in Asia, an outpost of civilization against barbarism.”[[4]](#footnote-4)

Herzl’s attitude was echoed by the generation of leaders that followed him. In the 1920s, the philosopher Martin Buber urged Zionists to search for traces of “Orientalism” in the Jewish soul. In response, Zeev Jabotinsky, the leader of the Revisionist stream of Zionism, declared: “We, the Jews, have nothing in common with what is called the ‘Orient,’ thank God. Insofar as our uneducated masses adhere to ancient spiritual traditions and laws that are reminiscent of the ‘Orient,’ they must be weaned off these.”[[5]](#footnote-5)

The distaste for the Orient has historical roots that precede the emergence of Zionism. In her well-known article “The Chain of Orientalism,” which is based on Edward Said’s theory of Orientalism, Aziza Khazzoom described the impact of the social and cultural structure that emerged in eighteenth-century Europe and imposed the East/West dichotomy on Jewish communities. Khazzoom showed that the stigma applied to the Jews of Germany and France as “Orientals” and “Asians” was transferred by these Jews themselves to their coreligionists from Eastern Europe, in order to depict themselves as “Westerners” worthy of advancement and assimilation in European Christian society. In turn, she continues, Eastern European Jews then transferred the “Oriental” stigma to the Jews of North Africa and the Middle East, who completed the chain of stigmatization by seeking to distinguish themselves from their Muslim neighbors, whom they labeled as “Orientals.”[[6]](#footnote-6)

The rejection of Orientality by the Zionist project was intensified against the background of the conflict that developed between Jews, on the one hand, and the Palestinians and Arab countries, on the other.

A revealing, and in some respects even an amusing, example of the distaste for the Oriental domain and culture can be found in the attitudes of David Ben-Gurion, Israel’s first prime minister, who claimed that “…our geographically close neighbors are not only the peoples who border the State of Israel on the land, but also those who border us on the sea… According to our geographical position, we are a Mediterranean country, and all the peoples who live along the coasts of the Mediterranean are our neighbors: Turkey, Bulgaria, Greece, Albania, Yugoslavia, Italy, France, Spain…”[[7]](#footnote-7) Ben-Gurion goes on to explain explicitly in his article that “Israel’s character will not be fashioned in the image of its land neighbors.” He quoted Finland as an example: “This is a small and close neighbor of the giant Soviet Union, yet it is not ‘integrated’ in the Soviet bloc. In terms of its regime, culture, tradition, and domestic and foreign policy, it is integrated in the free and democratic countries that cherish human liberty and the independence of small nations, and Finland is ready to fight with all its might for these values.”[[8]](#footnote-8)

Ben-Gurion’s position reflected his desire to confront the political isolation imposed on Israel as the result of its conflict with its neighbors, but it also manifests a principled Orientalist attitude toward the East.[[9]](#footnote-9) We may assume that his rejection of the Middle East, with its cultural characteristics, was not only the product of the conflict, but also contributed to it.

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Ben-Gurion’s comments from the 1950s are consistent with the manner in which most Israelis continued to regard the non-Oriental character of their country decades later. This is true despite the fact that the waves of mass immigration to Israel (1949-1956) created a situation in which half the Jewish population has Middle Eastern or North African origins. An interesting illustration of the rejection of Israel’s Middle Eastern identity can be found in a comment by Leah Rabin, after her husband, Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin, was assassinated by a Jewish assailant in November 1995. When asked why her husband had not been wearing protective gear, she replied: “Why should he have worn a bullet-proof vest? What, are we in Africa?”[[10]](#footnote-10) Rabin chose to draw her comparison with Africa, whereas in reality Israel forms part of the Middle East, where the assassination of leaders is a relatively common phenomenon.[[11]](#footnote-11) (There is something both ironic and tragic in the realization that the Israeli Security Agency also perceived Israel as an exceptional country in the Middle East, in which a citizen would not dare to open fire on a leader for political motives; had it not adopted this worldview, it might have taken steps to protect Rabin more effectively against a potential assassin).[[12]](#footnote-12)

Further examples can be found of the Zionist and Israeli rejection of the Middle Eastern domain. Accordingly, it is hardly surprising that canonical works examining the emergence of Israeli society – Amos Elon’s *The Israelis*, Amos Oz’s *A Tale of Love and Darkness*, or Ari Shavit’s *My Promised Land*[[13]](#footnote-13) – all portray the state as an Ashkenazi/Western creation, ignoring its Middle Eastern context. In response, an extensive literature has developed exposing the manner in which the Jews of Islamic countries, and their culture, were excluded from the Zionist project.[[14]](#footnote-14)

In this article, however, we will seek to focus on an argument that has not previously been examined seriously in the scholarly literature. Contrary to the aspirations of Israel’s founders, the Oriental dimension of the country’s culture, society, and politics is expanding and deepening. We shall discuss the manner in which this is occurring, and the reasons for this process, below. The central thrust of the article is our identification of a process of Orientalization over recent decades in which Israel is becoming more similar to its neighbors in sociocultural terms. However, we will present this process of Orientalization through the theoretical concept of Creolization, which distinguishes Israeli from Arab culture and, in our opinion, more accurately describes the process in Israeli society as a new creation resulting from an admixture of East and West.

*Working Title: Israel and Its Neighbors – The Original Similarity*

Culture is comprised of diverse components – language, music, cinema, television, food, and so forth – and has ramifications for the shaping of society and of the political system. In all these contexts, Israeli society has adopted clearly Oriental characteristics over recent decades.

Before discussing this, however, it is important to emphasize that, in many ways, Israel was similar to the surrounding countries of the Middle East from its establishment. (Of course, it should go without saying that there are also many differences between Israel and its neighbors.) Even Israel’s critics will admit that, in many respects, it is a democracy; its founders were European; it has liberal characteristics and an advanced hi-tech economy; and it has a Western cultural orientation – all features that distinguish it from its neighbors.

However, as the Orientalist Asaf David has noted, while the Zionist project was in many respects one of colonial settlement, Israel from the outset was similar to its neighbors – Egypt, Jordan, Syria, Iraq, and Lebanon – in the sense that all these are new nation-states created following the retreat of Western colonialism from the region in the mid-twentieth century.[[15]](#footnote-15) As a result, and again like its neighbors, Israel has been forced to confront the typical processes seen in post-colonial countries regarding the tension between national identity and supranational identity. In the Israeli context, Jewish religious identity threatened Israeli national identity, while in the Arab countries the process also evolved as conflict between distinct sectarian religious identities. A further common feature is the fact that in all the countries of the region, including Israel, religion and state compete for dominant status and to shape the public domain.

Thirdly, with the exception of Lebanon, where power and resources have been divided between different groups, in all the other countries of the region, one distinct religious or national groups enjoys an advantage in terms of the control of power and resources. In Israel, the Jews enjoy this status. A further similarity is that Israeli society, with its various distinct communities – despite the enactment of basic laws intended to ensure individual liberty – is essentially a collectivist society based on a unifying national ethos. In this respect, it has more in common with the surrounding societies than with Western liberal democracies shaped in the spirit of individualism.[[16]](#footnote-16)

Naturally, there is a difference between the monarchist or presidential-dictatorial regimes of the Arab countries, many of which have undergone military coups,[[17]](#footnote-17) and the democratic regime in Israel. A common feature, however, is the supremacy of the military and security establishment over the civilian establishment in decision-making processes.[[18]](#footnote-18) Indeed, Oren Barak concludes that “part of the reason why some Middle Eastern states remain democratically challenged is the emergence, operation, and political influence of ‘security networks’ and ‘deep states’— informal actors in the area of national security.” He draws together Turkey, Lebanon, Israel, and Egypt in this respect.[[19]](#footnote-19)

The final common denominator between Israel, since its formative years, and its neighbors relates to the demographic aspect. Since the waves of mass immigration, ending with the immigration of Moroccan Jews in the late 1950s, at least half the Jewish population of Israel has its origins in the Muslim countries. When we also take into account that, since its establishment, approximately twenty percent of the country’s population have been Arabs, there can be no doubt that Orientality has always been a significant component in Israel’s identity.

As noted, all these factors show that in sociopolitical terms there have always been similarities between Israel and the other countries of the Middle East. As explained in the introduction, however, the rejection of the East in Zionist thought, and the impact of the Israeli-Arab conflict, meant that Israel’s identification as a Middle Eastern country was sidelined in favor of an attempt to shape and define it as a Western island, with the many ramifications this engendered. In the next section, which forms the heart of this article, we will show that despite this attempt, developments in Israeli society over recent decades have contributed to a process of Orientalization that has included both Ashkenazim (Jews with roots in Christian Europe) and Mizrahim (Jews with roots in Islamic countries in the Middle East and North Africa).

**The Orientalization of Language**

Language has a dual representative aspect as one of the most important components of the imagined community and as the frame of the text around or under the image.[[20]](#footnote-20) The transformation of Hebrew from a sacred tongue, as it was during the period of exile, to a modern spoken and written language, is generally recognized as one of the key projects of the Zionist enterprise. The Zionists faced the need to position Hebrew as the language of a revived nation, in the face of the large number of languages spoken by Jews from different communities, particularly Yiddish. From the earliest days, however, spoken Hebrew absorbed expressions and words from Arabic, both due to the influence of the surroundings in Palestine and due to a desire to emphasize an indigenous character.[[21]](#footnote-21) The absorption of hundreds of thousands of immigrants from Islamic countries during the years following independence meant that Israel became a county in which various Arabic dialects were present in many homes. However, due to Zionist ideological considerations, these dialects were marginalized and stigmatized, with the exception of some colloquial expressions. The use of Arabic was confined mainly to curses and slang expressions regarded as part of a low-status “street jargon.”[[22]](#footnote-22)

Even Israeli slang, particularly among the elites and in public usage, tended to prefer the adoption of English expressions and words.[[23]](#footnote-23) Most of the studies examining the influence of foreign languages on Israeli society have also highlighted the process of “Americanization.”[[24]](#footnote-24) (Without doubting the ongoing impact of American culture on Israel, as in many other countries around the world, in the Israeli case it can also be suggested that the desire to mark a distinction from the Orient also played a role in the adoption of English expressions).

Concern at the “Levantinization” of Israel also displaced Arabic as a language of study in schools, except as a tool to meet the needs of the military Intelligence Corps.[[25]](#footnote-25) The language scholar Abd el-Rahman Marai suggests that the use of Arabic words and expressions began to expand after the 1967 War. Several factors contributed to this process: The Arabs were no longer seen as threatening, but as defeated; the occupation of the territories increased the degree of contract between Jews and Palestinians, many of whom began to work as laborers and service-providers in Israel; Arabic was already spoken in many homes of immigrants from Islamic countries, who could therefore use the language in dialogue with Palestinians.[[26]](#footnote-26)

Arabic has continued to penetrate into Hebrew,[[27]](#footnote-27) and recent studies identify a large number of Arabic words that have become current in Israeli slang. The fact that words, expressions, and epithets – such as *shakshuka* (a dish made from tomatoes and eggs), *falafel*, *humus*, *ya Allah* (an expression of surprise), *khalas* (“enough, already,”) *mabsut* (“happy,”) *ahla* (“awesome,”) and so forth – have become an integral part of Hebrew jargon is regarded almost as a natural process, with little attention to their Arabic origins or the cultural implications of this process.

Thus the process of penetration of Arabic into Hebrew is not new. However, apart from the intensification of this process over the past two decades,[[28]](#footnote-28) the main change regarding Arabic concerns the greater legitimacy this now enjoys. Arabic expressions that were previously confined to slang or street jargon can now be found in official statements issued by senior politicians. One example begins with the singer Neta Barzilai, who in 2018 won the competition to select Israel’s representative to the Eurovision Song Contest. Barzilai thanked the audience using the Moroccan-Jewish term *kapara.* (The word originally refers to a ritual of the annulment of sins conducted before Yom Kippur, but among Moroccan Jews it became a term meaning “darling.”) After Barzilai won the European competition, her use of the term *kapara* spread among the general public. Even Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu – the scion of an elite European family who was raised in the prestigious Jerusalem neighborhood of Rehavia and in the United States, published an official statement headed “Neta – *kapara* to you!”

The usage of the word *kapara* by the son of the late Professor Ben-Zion Netanyahu in a formal context is no trivial matter, and no coincidence. Words and expressions that less than a decade ago were identified exclusively with a Mizrahi identity, and perceived as the preserve of Mizrahi grandmothers who had not yet come to terms with modernity (including the phrase *khamsa-khamsa* – literally “five-five” – which serves as an amulet against the evil eye, and was used by actress Gal Gadot when an American interview inquired how she was doing) have become natural and pan-Israeli coinages that epitomize a uniquely Israeli cultural identity. Benny Gantz, the candidate for prime minister on behalf of the Kachol Lavan party in 2019 – who is also of Ashkenazi origin – rejected criticism of his wife’s allegedly left-wing views by issuing a one-word statement – *kharta* (an Arabic word for “nonsense.”)[[29]](#footnote-29) Ironically, although the official state downgraded the status of Arabic when it enacted the Nation-State Law in 2019,[[30]](#footnote-30) Arabic is moving beyond the realms of slang and entering written language. Journalists readily use words such as *alek* (so-called) and *fadiha* (disgrace), to give just two prominent examples.

It is ironic, too, that the name of the song that brought Neta Barzilai success in the Eurovision is itself composed of two Arabic words: *bassa – sababa* (“bummer – cool”) – words that transformed the performer into an Israeli-Zionist hero. Moreover, a desire can be seen among a significant section of the young Israeli-Jewish generation to resume the use of the various Arabic dialects that the immigrants from Arab countries brought to Israel. Groups have been launched on Facebook to this end (such as “Preserving the Iraqi language,” for example), and private Arabic study groups have been established. In recent years, theaters have staged plays in Moroccan.[[31]](#footnote-31) In the early 1920s, two Zionist thinkers and leaders – Ahad Ha’am, considered the founder of the school of spiritual/cultural Zionism, and Yosef Klausner, a scholar of the Second Temple period and a leading figure in right-wing Zionism – warned that the Zionist enterprise must avoid the use of Arabic, for otherwise it would lead to the “unnecessary Levantinization of the Jews.” Their warning would appear to have come true.[[32]](#footnote-32)

Given the inherent connection between language and ideology, and between language and sociocultural and political reality, as Pierre Bourdieu explained,[[33]](#footnote-33) it would clearly be wrong to underestimate the political significance of the penetration of Arabic into Hebrew, or to ignore the future implications of this phenomenon.

For the present, however, it can be suggested that the growing legitimization of the use of Arabic in Hebrew speech is actually encouraged by the absence of political significance. There are certainly intellectuals in Israel, such as Yehouda Shenhav and Yoni Mendel, who seek to promote the use of Arabic in the belief that this will enable “a different political reality to emerge”[[34]](#footnote-34) – in other words, the advancement of coexistence and reconciliation. For most Jews, however, the use of Arabic does not imply any conciliatory political message. Use of Arabic serves as an expression of Israeli cultural uniqueness within the Western culture with which Israel identifies itself, as well as the unique cultural aspects of Israeli identity within the context of the Jewish world. In other words, while the use of English served in part to distance Israel from the Orient,[[35]](#footnote-35) now that Israelis have internalized the sense that they are not part of the Middle East, it is less important for them to portray themselves as exclusively Western. They are free to seek a unique character as part of the West, and this creates the need to emphasize their Oriental component. For the present, then, the use of Arabic does not reflect any desire for new political discourse between Jews and Arabs, but rather reflects the manner in which the pendulum of Israeli identity as a hybrid construct between East and West has shifted toward the East.

**Music**

Alongside language, music forms another significant component in shaping the collective and as a system for symbolic representation.[[36]](#footnote-36) Of all the cultural changes that manifest the Orientalization of Israel, perhaps the most prominent is the change in the mainstream of Israeli music. One of the key manifestations of the melting pot policy that dominated Israel from its formative years through the turn of the century concerned the manner in which music with an Oriental hue was separated from other genres and castigated as “Mizrahi music” (ironically, “popular Israeli music” was actually influenced by Russian melodies, but known as “songs of the good old Land of Israel;” while Western-influenced rock and pop music performed in Hebrew were termed “Israeli rock.”)[[37]](#footnote-37)

From the 1970s, Mizrahi musicians who sang in Arabic or using Oriental rhythms (blended with pop motifs) were disparagingly known as “cassette music singers,” despite their enormous popularity, and were excluded from the mainstream.[[38]](#footnote-38) The main argument against Mizrahi music was that it relied on simplistic and basic melodies and banal lyrics (though the same description could be applied to many songs in the genres of the “good old Land of Israel” or Israeli rock). Despite the popularity of Mizrahi music, its inferior and sectarian image meant that Mizrahi musicians who wished to be accepted as part of the Israeli mainstream, or to gain symbolic capital as artists, adopted a cautious approach. Even when a Mizrahi melody was used, the words were in Hebrew and an effort was made to avoid overtly Arab sounds. A classic example of this is the singer Ofra Haza, an Israeli woman of Yemenite origin, who become one of the two most prominent Israel female stars of the 1980s. In 1984 Haza released an album entitled “Songs of Yemen,” which was not played on the radio due to its perception as an Arab album, despite the fact that only three of the songs were performed in Arabic or the Yemenite dialect, while the remainder were in Hebrew. Absurdly, the album only enjoyed recognition in Israel after it became a hit outside Israel, when the British music company S Records purchased the rights to the album and marketed it under the title Fifty Gates of wisdom. Yet despite the fact that her international success was related to the Arab motif in her music, in her performances in Israel Haza never dared to sing in Arabic.

Three decades later, in 2015, a new band called A-WA was formed by young Israeli women whose parents were Yemenite Jews. The performers also offer original adaptations of Yemenite classics, but unlike Haza they sing exclusively in Yemenite Arabic. Their album was named after their main hit – Habib Galbi (“Beloved of My Heart” in Arabic). The song marked a formative moment in Israeli culture: for the first time, a contemporary song written entirely in Arabic appeared on the playlists of all the radio stations.[[39]](#footnote-39)

The contrast between the natural willingness of the members of the band to sing exclusively in Yemenite Arabic, and their ability to become successful in Israel, and the difficulties experienced by Haza due to the stigmatization of her work as an “Arab album” highlights the enormous change that has occurred in the attitude to Mizrahi music in Israel.[[40]](#footnote-40)

The case of A-WA is not an anecdote, but an illustration of broader musical phenomena. In 2019, the musician Dudu Tassa received the Ophir Award, Israel’s most prestigious cinema prize, for his score the movie Mami, which addresses Israeli-Palestinian relations. Tassa is as well-known musician who performed Israeli rock and pop compositions on “Eli Yatzpan Hosting,” a primetime television program in the late 1990s. However, he only became truly successful after 2011, when he began to perform Arabic songs that his grandfather, Daud al-Kuwaiti, had performed in Baghdad in the early twentieth century.[[41]](#footnote-41) In an ironic twist, the series of albums released by Dudu Tassa and the Kuwaitis, as his band was called, won Tassa a prize that epitomizes the Mizrahi turn in Israeli music. In 2014, he received a prize from Acum (Authors, Composers and Music Publishers in Israel) named after Sasha Argov, an Israeli musician of Russian origin who was considered one of the founders of the “good old Land of Israel” genre. And so, “from a field of cultural creativity whose status was marginal and illegitimate, it [elitist Arab-Mizrahi music] has now become music perceived through the same categories of complexity and sophistication as Western music, i.e. as artistic music.”[[42]](#footnote-42)

The singer Sarit Hadad, who also sings in Arabic and is considered one of the most popular performers in Israel, is another example of the manner in which Mizrahi music is now accepted in Israel.[[43]](#footnote-43) Although she is often identified as a “Moroccan,” Hadad’s family actually originates from the Caucuses and came to Israel in the 1970s. Given her origins in an Islamic country, we might have assumed that she would prefer to perform Western songs, due to the symbolic value once attached to Western culture in Israel, and that she would refrain from performing Mizrahi music in order to be accepted as a “pan-Israeli” performer. In fact, however, Hadad came to fame from the turn of the 21st century, after she began to perform in Arabic and to sing Mizrahi versions of songs from the “good old Land of Israel” genre. Hadad won recognition as “Female Singer of the Decade” in the hit parade of Israeli radio stations in 2009.[[44]](#footnote-44)

Another fascinating musical phenomenon concerns the band The Revivo Project, which offers musical performances combined with *Tachzina* gatherings (social events popular among Yemenite Jews that combine music, Torah study, and the chewing of khat). This band has revived the very same songs that in the 1970s and 1980s were condemned as “cassette music,” and yet precisely by so doing it has been praised by the media for offering a “high-quality alternative” to contemporary Mizrahi music, which is regarded as Mediterranean kitsch pop. Since 2014, The Revivo Project has appeared at the Sultan’s Pool in Jerusalem and the amphitheater in Caesarea – venues considered temples of the pan-Israeli mainstream.[[45]](#footnote-45)

The Revivo Project is a fascinating example of Creolization, since it seeks to return to the roots of the Mizrahi music that emerged spontaneously during family gatherings in the 1980s, drawing on diverse ethnic sources – Yemenite, Greek, Turkish, Arabic, Kurdish, and Moroccan.

It is important to emphasize that the examples discussed above do not constitute purely Arabic music, but instead operate within what Homi Bhabha calls “the third space,” as a hybrid musical community combining multiple identities shaped through a constant process of cultural negotiation along the boundary between two worlds.[[46]](#footnote-46) Their success is certainly also grounded in postmodern approaches that have encouraged critics of elitist music to regard their work not only as authentic – which is in turn considered primitive – but also as hybrid, a concept perceived as rich and progressive. Be this as it may, the net result is that Israel is now witnessing a course of development that contradicts the “de-Arabization” process, in which Mizrahi musicians were also expected to participate during the early decades of the state.[[47]](#footnote-47)

The domination of Israeli music by the Mizrahi sound is also apparent in the choices made by audiences in the main musical competitions since the turn of the century. The television series A Star is Born (the Israeli version of American Idol) was launched in 2002 and has become one of the most popular television shows in the country. Between 2002 and 2018, without exception, all the winners of the competition included Mizrahi versions of songs considered part of the “good old Land of Israel genre,” through to the finals. Moreover, five of the ten winners from 2002 through 2012 chose a Mizrahi interpretation of an “Israeli” song, or an original Mizrahi song, for their final performance.

Since 1969, the popular army radio station Galei Tzahal has chosen a Singer of the Year. Over almost three decades, through 1997, not single singer who performed Mizrahi music won the title. (Naturally, the definition of “Mizrahi music” is not hermetic, but reflects a complex cultural construct inspired by various cultures that might better have been termed Mediterranean pop; accordingly, this music should be examined from its inception through the concept of Creolization; nevertheless, the fact is that it has been defined as “Mizrahi” in Israeli discourse). Meanwhile, from 1998 through 2018, the only singer who has won the title three times in succession (and six times in total) is Eyal Golan, a performer of Yemenite origin who sings Mizrahi music and also performs in Arabic (in cover versions of new pop songs). Indeed, from 2011 through 2018, five performers who sing Mizrahi music won the Singer of the Year award. Perhaps the most powerful illustration of the domination of Israel by Mizrahi music is the Israeli music television station (Channel 24) established in 2003. After the channel’s ratings remained low, it rebranded as a niche Mizrahi station (without changing its name), and since then it has become one of the country’s most popular stations.

*Working title: Jewish Food as Middle Eastern Food*

In the modern era, food is not just about sustenance, but constitutes a consumer item reflecting social and cultural relations.[[48]](#footnote-48) Arab/Mizrahi dishes – particularly skewered meat, falafel, and Arab vegetable salad – were common in Israel from its formative years.[[49]](#footnote-49) This was due both to the culinary preferences of immigrants from Muslim countries and to geographical influences on Israeli cuisine.[[50]](#footnote-50) However, during the Yishuv period, the term “Jewish food” was associated with Eastern European cuisine, while Middle Eastern dishes were considered simple folk food reflecting foreign influences. By contrast, since the turn of the century it has become apparent that Mediterranean features now define Israeli cuisine, both in the home and in restaurants, while Eastern European food is regarded as a mere anecdote. Moreover, Mizrahi dishes that were once regarded as folk food have in recent years been repackaged as culinary trends in prestigious restaurants.[[51]](#footnote-51)

The chef Eyal Shani is one of the leading figures in the culinary scene in Israel in the twenty-first century. He is responsible for introducing the concept of food served in pita bread in prestigious restaurants around the turn of the century. His restaurants Hamiznon and Hasalon were even replicated in New York in 2018, leading the New York Times to remark that they represent the “Israeli cuisine” that has replaced the trend for Jewish restaurants in the city; although the cuisine they offer is essentially Mediterranean, it is presented as a unique Israeli creation.[[52]](#footnote-52) The emergence of pita bread as the basic marker of Israeli cuisine is a remarkable development. Until the 1980s, when the Israeli government subsidized basic food items, it included European bread, but refused to extend the subsidy to pita, which served as the staple bread for the immigrants from the Muslim countries, as well as for Palestinians, claiming that it was not representative of the taste of most of the Israeli population.[[53]](#footnote-53)

Pita is not the only item from Arab cuisine that has been adopted in Israel. As of 2019, the latest trend in Israeli restaurants is knafeh – a classic Arab dessert made from melted cheese (salted or sweet). Chef Haim Cohen explained in an interview for Haaretz that “I didn’t invent knafeh, just as Eyal Shani didn’t invent pita. It’s always been here – in Jaffa, Jerusalem, and Nazareth. But it’s true that now it’s moved into good Israeli restaurants.”[[54]](#footnote-54) Cohen is an important example of the Middle Eastern domination of Israeli cuisine. He appears regularly on the popular television program MasterChef, which presents and reflects the latest trends in what is regarded as “Israeli taste.” “In many ways we had to stand up for ourselves,” he added in the above-mentioned interview. “Back then people said, ‘Who’s going to pay to eat couscous [a popular Moroccan dish]?’ But people eat it at home, and the time’s right – there’s a young generation that is starting a new history and breaking the old rules.”

Ronit Vered, who writes a weekly column on food in the Haaretz supplement, also emphasizes the dominant Middle Eastern characteristics of Israeli cuisine, both in the home and in highly-regarded restaurants. In this manner, Israeli food crosses political boundaries. “Until 1948, the Middle East was a single cultural domain, with the same foods and with significant Arab, and even more so Turkish, influences. Knafeh is a pretty exceptional relic from this period. I can understand why Palestinians are offended about what’s been taken from them. The way we expropriate food is just a symbol for what we really took from them. But Israelis are excellent marketers and mediators, and so everything becomes Israeli cuisine.”[[55]](#footnote-55)

**Mizrahi Politics or Politics by Mizrahim?**

On 17 May 1977, the Likud under Menachem Begin won the elections, and the Revisionist right-wing school of Zionism came to power for the first time. The election marked a political turning-point in the history of Zionism. Since then, the right wing has dominated Israeli politics almost without interruption – sometimes on its own, and sometimes alongside the various reincarnations of the Labor Party. The dominance of the right in Israel over recent decades has been analyzed from various angles: the growing intertwining of religion and politics, the decline of the socialist dimension of Israeli society, and the impact of the occupation of the territories in 1967, among others.[[56]](#footnote-56) To a large extent, however, it would be accurate to claim that the dominance of the right marks the victory of Mizrahi politics (even though the leaders of the right-wing parties are still Ashkenazim and these parties do not necessarily represent the interests of Mizrahim as a distinct sector).

The sociologist Shlomo Swirski accurately defined the Likud victory of 1977 as a Mizrahi revolt against the rule of the Labor Party, rather than overt ideological support for the Likud’s positions: “the Orientals strengthened the hyena – the Likud – in order to weaken the bear – the Labor Party.”[[57]](#footnote-57) Be this as it may, there can be no doubt regarding the contribution to Begin’s victory made by Israeli Jews whose origins lay in the Islamic countries. The results of these elections were the culmination of the relationship that Begin had begun to establish with Mizrahim at the time of the great immigration wave of the 1950s. According to Yonathan Shapiro, in the 1955 election, Mizrahim made up 60% of Herut’s voters, but only 30% of them voted for the party. In 1973, over 50% of Mizrahim voted Likud, and in 1977 almost 60%.[[58]](#footnote-58) The support of this sector for the Likud, even among third- and fourth-generation descendents of the Mizrahi immigrants, remains an important factor in the Likud victories.[[59]](#footnote-59)

It is important to note that in politics, with the notable exception of Shas, Middle Eastern Jews in Israel have not acted in concert as a bloc of voters any more than European Jews, and politicians of Middle Eastern descent are represented across the political spectrum. Still, it is accurate to say that most Mizrahi Jews have generally been stalwarts of the right. This has been true since the era when the old Labor establishment tended to treat them with condescension, while Menahem Begin’s Herut, the precursor to the Likud, did not. Their affinity for the right also has much to do with personal memories of displacement by Muslims, with a sense of the way things work in the Middle East, and with shared understanding of the role of religion as a kind of traditionalism in the modern age.[[60]](#footnote-60)

New studies demonstrate how the Mizrahi-Likud vote functioned as a mutual, ground-up political movement.[[61]](#footnote-61)

These recent interventions clarify Mizrahi organizing for the Likud party and Likud responses to the needs of Mizrahi Israelis by providing evidence indicating a genuine political movement in which Mizrahi Israeli activism and involvement in the Israeli right was the primary mode through which Likud achieved its 1977 victory, and that right-wing Israeli politics were a pivotal avenue in Mizrahi Israelis’ assertion of their individual political agency and currency.

However, the dominance of the Mizrahi vote in Israeli politics is not confined to the Likud. In 1984, Shas was formed as an ultra-Orthodox Mizrahi party that has also managed to attract many less devout but traditional voters, the overwhelming majority of whom are Mizrahim. At its peak, in 1999, Shas won 17 seats in the Knesset and was the third-largest party. Since its establishment it has constituted a key party capable of determining the identity of the partners forming a ruling coalition (in 1992 and 1999, the only instances in which Shas chose to align itself with the Labor Party, it thereby determined the political situation in favor of a leftist coalition that could only exist with its support).

The Shas party claims to raise a single ‘‘Sephardic’’ banner, and it is based on Mizrahi cultures tied to various ethnic identities and religious modes. It has structured itself around salient figures who highlight the constituencies of Jews from Iraq and Morocco. At a cultural level, the movement sought to link the rationalist halakhic worldview of Rabi Ovadia Yosef and the ecstatic devotion to ‘tzadikim’ that continues to be an important element among Jews from Moroccan backgrounds.[[62]](#footnote-62)

Several different Mizrahi communities expressed their objections to Ovadia Yosef’s attempts to institute a single Sephardic halakhic standard[[63]](#footnote-63) – but in any case the irony is that Shas is trying to have a Sephardic melting pot in contrast to the original made by Ben-Gurion, which was Ashkenazi-oriented.

Another interesting phenomenon is Kulanu (“All of Us”), a centrist party that was established in 2013 by Moshe Kahlon, who began his political career as one of the promising future leaders of the Likud party. Kahlon, who is of Tripolitan (Libyan) origin, managed to win ten seats in the 2015 elections and secured the influential position of finance minister.

Unlike Shas, Kahlon’s support comes mainly not from the disadvantaged Mizrahi periphery, but from Mizrahi middle-class voters in the prosperous suburbs around Tel Aviv and in Mizrahi moshavim. He was perceived as an authentic model of a Mizrahi Israeli who had got ahead through his own hard work, recognizing both the discrimination against Mizrahim by the Zionist establishment and the Zionist needs that engendered this phenomenon. As a representative of the Mizrahi middle class, Kahlon does not demand compensation or express opposition to the ramifications of the Zionist project for Mizrahim in general. At the same time, he does not alienate himself from his Mizrahi character on the symbolic and family levels. He is more traditional than secular, and more right-wing than left, though he is not shackled to a binding right-wing ideology and is willing to consider compromises. In this respect, he reflects the most prominent Mizrahi phenomenon of recent years: the emergence of the Mizrahi middle class. Sociologist Nissim Leon defines Kulanu – which in 2019 merged back into the Likud – as “protestant ethnicity,” as a privatized and organized structure – in contrast with the “Catholic ethnicity” of Shas, for example. Leon also regards Kahlon as the symbolic archetype of the emerging Mizrahi middle class.[[64]](#footnote-64)

In fact, since 1977, the division between right and left in Israeli politics largely tracks other divisions: Mizrahi/Ashkenazi, traditional/secular, and low/high socioeconomic status. The paradox is that while a pro-traditional outlook and Mizrahi identity are usually associated in Israel with more hawkish parties, Mizrahi Jewry was originally characterized by moderation—with regard to relations with the Arabs, as well as to religion—which could have made it a potential match for the left. When Avi Gabbay, who has Moroccan roots, was elected to head the Labor Party in 2017, he claimed that Netanyahu was correct when he stated in the past that “the left has forgotten what it means to be Jewish.” Gabbay wanted to challenge the Mizrahi association between a pro-traditional orientation and hawkish politics in Israel. However, his words were interpreted as criticism of his own party, and the discussion was nipped in the bud. This points to a concluding thought about the importance of the Mizrahi politics: as long as the accepted equation still ties traditionalists and Mizrahim to the right, and Ashkenazim and secular Jews to the left, the Israeli political system will continue to be shaped by the impact of the cleavage between Mizrahim and Askenzim.

**Religion**

When it comes to the religious life of the country, a misfortune visited upon Israeli Judaism was the modern and Western idea that one is either “religious” or “secular,” a distinction that never existed in the Jewish communities of the East. There, Jews were bound to an inescapable but flexible amalgam called “tradition.” One could not leave tradition, but there was room for movement within it.[[65]](#footnote-65) Until recent decades, studies on the level of religiosity among Israeli Jews emphasized “secular” and “religious” as the two central options, while “traditional” was reserved for Jews of Mizrahi origin who were perceived as maintaining a negative and insufficiently clear position – i.e. as neither sufficiently religious nor sufficiently secular.[[66]](#footnote-66) More recent surveys, however, have shown that even a majority of those Israeli Jews who define themselves as secular observe the Jewish festivals. Some 80 percent of Israeli Jews believe in God to some extent, 92 percent support the practice of circumcision, and so forth.[[67]](#footnote-67) In this respect, it is certainly true to claim that Israel has witnessed the emergence of a new religious form, a variety of open traditionalism shared by Ashkenazim and Mizrahim alike, but which actually draws its qualities from the characteristics of religion, and attitudes to religion, among the Jews from the Islamic countries.

In a traditional Middle Eastern family in Israel, you might follow a Sabbath dinner on Friday night with a soccer game, or attend synagogue on Saturday morning and then go to the beach. Tradition is not something you must take or leave, but something in which you live to the best of your ability in different ways at different times. The idea of a deep religious identity combined with a deep religious flexibility has yet to find coherent public expression in Israel.

ֿIn Israel, the liberal streams of Judaism familiar to Americans are seen as foreign and quite irrelevant, a result in part of the relatively small number of their adherents who have immigrated to Israel. But *mesorati*in the eastern style is seen as an authentic Israeli identity, and its increased adoption may be another product of the creeping admiration for Middle Eastern Jews on the part of Israelis of European descent. Indeed, in many ways the traditional Mizrahi approach to religion, which was once regarded as outmoded and archaic, has come to be regarded as an enlightened, progressive, and even “cool” position, if “coolness” is a measurable quality. This also explains, in part, the changing attitude to the term “Arab Jews,” as we shall discuss now.

**The Concept of the Arab Jew**

The Beitar Jerusalem soccer club has been identified with the Herut and Likud movements since its establishment in 1936. Since the turn of the 21st century, a circle of supporters known as “La Familia,” identified with a racist ideology, has acquired a unique status among the team’s supporters. Many of the chants sung by supporters at matches focus on hatred of Arabs and Muslims. The club has struggled against manifestations of racism in the stands, though to date it has not been completely successful in this. Concern at riots by fans have deterred the management of the club from recruiting Muslims players. In this manner, Beitar Jerusalem has been transformed from an agreeable emblem of the “Second Israel,” identified with Mizrahim and the Likud, to a club many of whose supporters engage in racist actions, and whose management is the only one in Israel that declines to employ Arab players. In 2017, Haaretz joined a campaign to integrate Arab soccer players in the team. Responding to allegations of racism, the team’s spokesman, Asher Dudai, adopted a surprising position, declaring that the team could not be racist, since its chairman is “an Arab Jew of Yemenite origin” and many players are also “Arab Jews.”[[68]](#footnote-68)

The spokesman’s claims were obviously chosen in an attempt to evade specific discussion of the club’s refusal to employ Muslim players. Nevertheless, the use of the term “Arab Jew” is interesting. This term has become current thanks to the works of scholars such as Yehouda Shenhav[[69]](#footnote-69) and Ella Shohat,[[70]](#footnote-70) who have analyzed the relations between Mizrahim and Ashkenazim through the prism of post-colonialist theories, sparking disagreement in academic discourse concerning the historical accuracy of this term. In the public domain, the term “Arab Jew” has been rejected by most Israeli Jews as reflecting a radical post-Zionist position, including by Mizrahim.[[71]](#footnote-71) However, nowadays the idea of the Arab Jew has a lively presence in three discursive spheres. The first—media and popular culture—involves television and film, live performance, and social media, and includes blogs as well as music videos, and poetry slams, typically disseminated on YouTube.[[72]](#footnote-72) The second sphere involves literary representation in print media, primarily in Hebrew but increasingly in English, Arabic, and other languages. The Arab Jew is especially salient in the work of Iraqi-born Israeli authors Shimon Ballas and Sami Michael, who directly engage questions of Arabness in depicting their characters as natives of Baghdad and as new immigrants in Israel; other writers, such as Sami Shalom Chetrit, Ronny Someck, and Almog Behar, thematize the Arab Jew in a more contemporary Israeli context.

And in 2016, Tel Aviv University and Ben-Gurion University of the Negev undertook a joint venture to develop a new interdisciplinary BA degree in “limudey tarbut ‘Aravit-Yehudit” (which translates either as “Jewish-Arab” or “Judeo-Arabic” cultural studies).[[73]](#footnote-73)

However, the most interesting use of this term is by overly Zionist and right-wing speakers, such as the Beitar Jerusalem spokesman. The question thus arises as to how and why such a controversial concept has acquired such a popular position.

The fact that a term regarded as having a radical meaning that undermines the Zionist ethos can be adopted so readily by a leading figure in Beitar Jerusalem is particularly interesting, suggesting, above all, a dynamic and rapid process entailing the consolidation and recognition of new or renewed identities in Israel. However, there are additional reasons. The adoption of the concept “Arab Jew” was facilitated by the restructuring and reinterpretation of this term in a manner that differed from that intended by Shohat and Shenhav. The term “Arab Jew” was originally intended to portray Israel and the Zionist project as agents of de-Arabization who rejected any attempt to preserve Arab culture and speech among Arab Jews as a dangerous option and the flaunting of an identity label that should properly be muted in the face of Ashkenazi hegemony. The advocates of the term sought to describe a reality in which the Arabic of Arab Jews was forgotten, while Mizrahim highlighted the religious Jewish elements of their identity – since Judaism, in its Zionist form, was somewhat absurdly regarded as the opposite of Arabism.[[74]](#footnote-74) Shohat, Shenhav, and others hoped that the inculcation of this concept would lead to the liberation of Arab identity among the Mizrahim, and thereafter to a path toward compromise between Jews and Muslims through the bridge the Mizrahim would offer once they recognized their own identity as Arab Jews.

In practice, however, this concept has been denuded of its political or epistemological meaning, and it has essentially become a purely rhetorical synonym for the term “Mizrahi.” This term was able to penetrate the mainstream due to the processes reviewed above, whereby Mizrahi identity became a popular, correct, and even “cool” position, without reference to the profound change of consciousness that the intellectuals who coined the term had hoped to encourage. Indeed, the recognition that the Mizrahi is an “Arab Jew” became a sophisticated excuse for the adoption of hawkish attitudes – since if the Mizrahim are indeed Arab Jews, then the demanded reconciliation between Arabs and Jews can ostensibly take place solely within the boundaries of affiliation to the Jewish people. Moreover, in keeping with the adage “when in Rome do as the Romans do” – that is, by adopting negative stereotypes about the uncompromising Arab mentality – Mizrahim with right-wing Zionist leanings argue that precisely because of the Arab dimension in their own identity, they know that it is not possible to placate the Arabs (Muslims) by means of compromise.

However, a study by Dana Grosswirth-Kachtan found that soldiers in the Golani brigade, most of whom come from Mizrahi backgrounds (in contrast to Paratroopers, who are predominantly Ashkenazi), and who are known for their right-wing political leanings, have over recent years begun to distinguish themselves from the “Ashkenazi” Paratroopers not only by referring to themselves as “Mizrahim” but as “Arabs.” “Arab” was a term suggested by the Golani soldiers themselves to describe the ethnic component of their identity. “The “Arab” is undisciplined, rebellious, disorganized, and places a premium on family and loyalty.”[[75]](#footnote-75) Thus the use of the term “Arab” is intended to enhance the prestige and unique identity of the soldiers in Golani, as non-conformists, on the one hand, but as Israelis loyal to their national-Jewish identity, on the other. In the context of their competition with the Paratroopers for prestige, the Golani soldiers effectively adopted the label “Arab” in order to accentuate the experience of Mizrahiness that was imposed on them, including their perception as inferior, primitive, and problematic members of Israeli society,[[76]](#footnote-76) and to transform this into a source of pride in their rivalry with the Paratroopers, highlighting their elevated capacity to confront the Arab enemy.[[77]](#footnote-77)

The general assumption regarding the adoption of identities suggests a tendency for people to move from a marked identity to an unmarked or transparent one – i.e. from the ethnic group to the non-ethnic hegemonic group, in order to secure privileges.[[78]](#footnote-78) In the Israeli context, the dominant identity is Ashkenazi.[[79]](#footnote-79) However, Grosswirth-Kachtan found that even within the unassailable hegemony of the Paratroopers, as the epitome of Ashkenaziness, a tendency can be seen in the brigade in recent years to glance over at the cool masculinity embodied by the Golani soldiers. This tendency includes the adoption of Mizrahi speech patterns. In Humi’s terms, this is an example of mutual mimicry, whereby not only the black imitates the white, but the white also imitates some of the behaviors of the black.[[80]](#footnote-80) What is important for our purposes is the way in which Mizrahiness has come to define a prestigious status to the point that it has been intensified to “Arabness,” as well as the manner in which this prestige has penetrated military units that previously relied on their affiliation to the Ashkenazi hegemony, such as the Paratroopers. Since the epithet “Arab Jew” has been denuded of its original content and, as noted, no longer implies any post-Zionist tendencies or left-wing orientation, this phenomenon has hitherto been overlooked in the scholarly literature, which still perceives the term in its original academic sense. However, this phenomenon deserves attention, since it exposes the new cultural winds that are blowing in Israeli society.

Just as many white people in the United States adopt a black identity in the context of hip hop music,[[81]](#footnote-81) so soldiers in the Golani brigade, which once struggled to overcome the privilege enjoyed by the Paratroopers – but also among the Paratroopers themselves – there are those, both Ashkenazim and Mizrahim, who adopt Mizrahi patterns of dress, speech, and even kisses on the cheek by way of a greeting, as in Oriental culture, along with Mizrahi musical preferences.[[82]](#footnote-82) The process of Mizrahization in the military deserves particular attention since the Israeli military has always served in part as an agent of socialization and modernization, and was indeed intended to “create” the image of the New Jew in its Western-Ashkenazi model.

Again, it is important to emphasize the proud adoption of the term “Arab Jew” does not include any element of historical or political consciousness. It derives primarily from the self-confidence of Mizrahim in their own identity, just as German Jews who had disassociated themselves from the Oriental label, as Khazzoom discusses in the article mentioned in the introduction, again began to build synagogues in an Oriental style once they felt confident in their Western identity.[[83]](#footnote-83)

Thus the use of the term “Arab Jew” constitutes primarily a reaction to the stereotype imposed on Mizrahim by the Ashkenazi elite, which in political terms represented itself as enlightened and the Mizrahim as an obstacle to peace. In other words, distaste for the “Ashkenazi elite” is also an important key to understanding the expressions of hatred sometimes shown by Beitar Jerusalem fans, or Golani brigade soldiers, toward Arabs, as well as to understanding their identification with their own “Arabness:” We are racist in order to show contempt for values the elite considers important, but at the same time we are willing to define ourselves as Arabs, if this is what it takes to spurn the elite’s attempts to educate us.

The paradox is that it is precisely the erosion in the strength of the old liberal Ashkenazi elite, which sought to inculcate the term Arab Jew for political motives – and perhaps even out of patronizing sentiments toward Mizrahim – that gave the Beitar spokesman the courage and freedom to identify as part of a group of “Arab Jews,” just as this elite sees them – but on his own conditions and in his own time.

A final example of the popularity of the term “Arab Jew” can be found in the television series Fauda, which tells the story of IDF fighters in a unit whose members disguise themselves as Arabs in order to conduct operations in the territories. The series became a hit in Israel and was also sold to Netflix. The plot focuses on the core of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and is not afraid to present the similarity between the Mizrahi Jews who dress up as Arabs in order to fight them, and Palestinian Arabs themselves, with whom the disguised Jews discover an affinity. This plot twist highlights the complexity of the term “Arab Jew.” Derek Penslar thoughtfully comments on this:

…The Israeli operatives are intensely, viscerally connected to their enemy. They can live neither with nor without the Palestinians. Like the Maronites in Lebanon during its decades of civil war, the Israelis are natives of the Middle East even though they claim ties to the West. They are both dominators and victims.

The wall symbolizes the separation between the Israeli-Jewish “us” and the Palestinian “them,” and between the well-ordered Israeli state and the chaos (*Fauda* in Arabic) of the West Bank. But as the program’s characters show us, there can be no absolute separation between Jew and Arab. Israel is in, even if not of, the Middle East, and with every generation it moves further away from its European roots. Israel’s close political and economic ties to the United States, and its status as an EU member in most respects, exert a diminishing effect on the country’s political and military culture.[[84]](#footnote-84)

The popularity of Fauda among Israeli viewers indeed powerfully illustrates the manner in which the Zionist discourse of identities that separated Jew from Arab is blurring in favor of recognition of the Arab dimension of Jews in Israel – both Mizrahim and Ashkenazim, by virtue of the fact that they live in the Middle East. The ease with which Jewish identity connects to Arab is due, in part, to the fact that the political is separated from the cultural. In other words, the Zionist Jew, and even the combat soldier in the military, has no problem identifying as an Arab in cultural and geographical terms, as long as the hyphen that connects “Arab” and “Jew” has no connection to the resolution of the conflict between Jews and Arabs. To an extent, in political terms, the current popularity of the use of the term “Arab Jew” brings us back to an attitude expressed by Golda Meir in the 1970s, when she defined herself as a Jewish Palestinian.[[85]](#footnote-85) In other words, Arabness also serves as a manifestation of indigenousness and of a full right to the land.

Conclusion:

The paradox is that the more that Israel alienates itself from its Middle Eastern surroundings in political and diplomatic terms, the more Israelis are becoming integrated in this region in cultural terms, and the less afraid they are to portray themselves as Arab Jews. The perception of Israel as a Middle Eastern country influenced by its environs may explain, at least in part, a statement issued by the IDF Spokesperson in 2018 when the residents of the Gaza Strip threatened to demonstrate along the fence separating the area from Israel. The overt declaration that the IDF would open fire on civilian demonstrators who attempted to approach the fence was an unusual feature in the Spokesperson’s statements, which usually emphasize the efforts made by the IDF to avoid civilian casualties. We may understand the comment as integration of policies that are familiar in the neighboring regimes.

The fact that Netanyahu has remained in power for over a decade (and over 13 years if we include his first period of office) is also exceptional in the context of Israeli prime ministers, but may be attributed, among other factors, to the influence of the totalitarian regimes in Israel’s Middle Eastern environs, where power changes hands infrequently. A further reason for the process of Mizrahization relates to the policy of the right-wing governments under Netanyahu since 2009 to encourage Mizrahi culture. This policy was evident during the official ceremony for Israel’s Independence Day in 2018, when songs of the “good old Land of Israel” were performed in Mizrahi versions, and the focus was on the Jewish communities from around the Middle East. This forms part of an attempt to goad and damage the political left wing, which is perceived as representing the Western/Ashkenazi establishment.

In the same context, the Israeli education system has also invested growing resources in teaching the history of the Jews of Islamic countries. The emphasis, however, is on the fact that their Arab identity did not save them from an inferior status in Arab countries. In 2016, for example, Naftali Bennett, a far-right-wing political figure, capitalized upon Sephardi/Mizrahi discontent with the cultural and educational status quo by convening a committee tasked with making recommendations for enhancing the representation of Sephardi and Mizrahi Jewish heritage in Israel’s schools. Moroccan-born Israeli poet Erez Biton, who was appointed by Bennett to head the commission, intoned: “Eastern [i.e. Sephardi/Mizrahi] Jewry should not be ashamed; Zionism was ingrained in her from the belly and through birth. Now we want our contribution to also be evident in the educational curriculum.”[[86]](#footnote-86)

Ironically, then, although Mizrahi Jewry was more moderate in its attitude to religion and maintained better relations with the Muslim population than European Jewish communities did with their Christian neighbors, the process of Mizrahization has also developed a more nationalist position. In this context, we may perhaps adopt the observation made by Amnon Raz-Krakotzkin to the effect that the adoption or mimicry of Arab culture in Israel is actually intended to render the actual Arab superfluous.[[87]](#footnote-87) However, there can be no doubt that the future ramifications of this process may also contribute to reconciliation between Israelis and Arabs.

We have presented the process of Mizrahization in Israeli society as an expression of a change in the identity of this society, since identity is not an essentialist definition, but rather a place of ongoing and dynamic formation; or, as Stewart Hall says, of “becoming and not of being.”[[88]](#footnote-88) In this context, the time may have come to apply to the Jews in Israel the comment made by Goitein concerning the Jews of Yemen: “the most Jewish and most Arab of all Jews.”[[89]](#footnote-89) Yet what such processes reveal, we suspect, is the gradual acceptance of “Middle Eastern-ness” as part of Israeli life, accompanied by “resistance” to such acceptance, on the one hand, by those who see it as threatening and, on the other hand, by those who have a political stake in retaining Mizrahi-ness as a distinct category.[[90]](#footnote-90) However, the process of Mizrahization is but one side of the coin. Israelis are not becoming Arabs but rather manifesting another phenomenon – namely, Creolization.

1. Alexander Yakobson. “Jewish Peoplehood and the Jewish State, How Unique? – A Comparative Survey”, *Israel Studies* 13(2), 2008, pp 1-27. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Sammy Smooha. "The model of ethnic democracy: Israel as a Jewish and democratic state." *Nations and nationalism* 8.4, 2002, pp 475-503. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Ehud Barak, Address by Foreign Minister Ehud Barak to the Annual Plenary Session of the National Jewish Community Relations Advisory Council, 11.2.1996, <http://mfa.gov.il/mfa/go.asp?MFAH016g0>. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Arthur Hertzberg, *The Zionist Idea: A Historical Analysis and Reader*, New York: Atheneum, p. 222. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. The original quote appeared in an article entitled “The Orient” published in *Rassvet*. Zeev Jabotinsky, “HaMizrakh (The Orient)”, In: Yosef Nedva (eds), Ekronot Mankhim LeBa’ayot HaShaa [Guiding Principles for the Problems of Our Time[, Tel Aviv: Jabotinsky Institute, 1981, p 91 (English translation mine). [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Aziza Khazzoom, “The Great Chain of Orientalism: Jewish Identity, Stigma Management, and Ethnic Exclusion in Israel.” *American Sociological Review* 68 (4), 2003, pp 481–510. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. David Ben-Gurion, “An Eternal People or a Mediterranean People,” Articles Division, 6 May 1954, Ben-Gurion Archives [in Hebrew]. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Avi Shilon, “Toward the Eastern Frontier: Ben-Gurion’s Approach to India and Buddhism,” *Theory and Criticism*, 44, 2015, pp 127-142 [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. “Why should he wear a bulletproof vest, asks Leah Rabin,” *Haaretz*, 28 October 2001 [in Hebrew]. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Since the Middle East was divided into nation states, it has witnessed a series of political assassinations. Examples include the Egyptian Prime Minister Nokrashy in 1948; King Abdullah of Jordan in 1951; Mehdi Ben Barka, leader of the opposition to King Hassan of Morocco, in 1965; Egyptian President Anwar Sadat in 1981; Lebanese President-Elect Bachir Gemayel in 1982; and Lebanese Prime Minister Rafic Hariri in 2005 – among others. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. Moshe Shachal, The Police Minister at the time of the murder, said: “we didn’t believe that A Jew will murder a Jew”. Walla, December 7, 2015. <https://news.walla.co.il/item/2904151> [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. Ari Shavit, *My Promised Land: The Triumph and Tragedy of Israel*, 2014; Amos Elon, *The Israelis: Founders and Sons* (1971; reissued 1983); Amos Oz, *A Tale of Love and Darkness*, 2002. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. See, for example, Hannan Hever, Yehouda Shenhav, and Pnina Motzafi-Haller, (eds.), *Mizrahim beyisrael: | iyun bikorti mehudash* (Jerusalem: 2002); Gershon Shafir and Yoav Peled, *Being Israeli: The Dynamics of Multiple Citizenship* (Cambridge: 2002); Yehouda Shenhav, *Hayehudim ha| aravim: leumiyut, dat veetniyut* (Tel Aviv: 2003); Baruch Kimmerling, Mehagrim, mityashvim, yelidim: hamedinah vehahevrah beyisrael bein ribui tarbuyot lemilhamot tarbut (Tel Aviv: 2004); Yossi Yonah and Yehuda Goodman (eds.), Ma’arbolet hazehuyot: diyun bikorti bedatiyut uvehiloniyut beyisrael (Jerusalem: 2004); Amnon Raz-Krakotzkin, ‘‘The Zionist Return to the West and the Mizrahi Jewish Perspective,’’ in Orientalism and the Jews, ed. Ivan Davidson Kalmar and Derek J. Penslar (Waltham: 2005), 162–181; Gil Eyal, The Disenchantment of the Orient: Expertise in Arab Affairs and the Israeli State [Stanford: 2006]. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. Asaf David, What is Israel’s place in the Middle East? <https://972mag.com/what-is-israels-place-in-the-middle-east/121739/> [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. Augustus Richard Norton, ed. *Civil society in the Middle East. 2 (2001)*. Vol. 2. Brill, 2001. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. Eliezer Be’eri, “The Waning of the Military Coup in Arab Politics”, *Middle Eastern Studies*, Vol. 18, No. 1, (1992), pp. 69-81, 128; Elie Kedourie, *Politics in the Middle East* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), pp. 306-325; Amos Perlmuter, "The Arab Military Elite", in:, *Political Roles and Military Rulers* (London: Frank Cass, 1981), pp. 160-195. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. Although Israel was defined at its establishment as a parliamentary democracy in which the military is subservient to the political echelon, it was no coincidence that the first prime minister also served as minister of defense. In 1955, for example, a plot known as the “Bad Business” was uncovered, in which the military establishment had acted behind the back of then-Prime Minister Moshe Sharett. The separation between the military and political echelons in Israel has also been blurred by the tendency among many senior officers to embark on a political career after completing their service. See: Yoram Peri. “The Political–Military Complex: The IDF’s Influence Over Policy Towards the Palestinians Since 1987,” *Israel Affairs, 2005,*11(2): 324-344. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. Oren Barak, "Security Networks, Deep States, and the Democratic Deficit in the Middle East", *The Middle East Journal*, vol. 72 no. 3, 2018, pp. 447-465. *Project MUSE* muse.jhu.edu/article/702196. [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. Ronald Barthes, "The Rhetoric of the Image." Pp. 32-51 in *Image- Music-Text*, trans, and ed. S. Heath. Glasgow: Fo, 1977 [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. Regarding the attempts to imitate Bedouin and Arabs during the early Zionist period in Palestine, see: Yisrael Bartal, *Cossack and Bedouin*, Tel Aviv: Am Oved, 2007 [in Hebrew]. [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
22. Ora (Rodrig) Shwartzwald, “The Weight of Foreign Influence in Hebrew,” *Am Vasefer* 10, Tel Aviv: World Hebrew Alliance, 1988, p. 49 [in Hebrew]. [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
23. Abd el-Rahman Marai, “The Echo of the New Ulpan,” issue 100, Tel Aviv: Beit Berl, Winter 2013, p. 123 [in Hebrew]. [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
24. Issue no. 5 of *Israel Studies* was devoted entirely to the impact of Americanization: *Israel Studies* 5:1, 2000. [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
25. Yonatan Mendel, *A Language Out of Place: Arabic Studies in the Jewish Community in Palestine/Israel* (Van Leer and Ha-Kibbutz Ha-Me’uchad, Jerusalem, (forthcoming, 2019) [in Hebrew] [↑](#footnote-ref-25)
26. Abd el-Rahman Marai, “Arabic and Hebrew in Israeli Reality,” pp. 164-182, in: Yotam Benziman (ed.), *Plural Language: Hebrew as a Cultural Language*, Jerusalem: Van Leer Institute, 2013 [in Hebrew]. [↑](#footnote-ref-26)
27. Nissan Netzer, “Hebrew in Jeans: The Character of Hebrew Slang,” Beersheva: Ben Gurion University, 2007 [in Hebrew]. See also a survey conducted by Rubik Rosenthal in 2005, which found that 34 percent of 265 foreign words that had penetrated colloquial Hebrew were of Arabic origin. Rubik Rosenthal, “Achla Dawin: Arabic Shows a Surprising Innovative Capacity in Hebrew Slang,” *Panim* 33, 2005, pp. 40-45 [in Hebrew]. [↑](#footnote-ref-27)
28. Amalia Rosenblum and Zvi Trigger, *Wordless: Israeli Culture through the Prism of Language*, Or Yehuda: Kinneret-Zemora-Bitan-Dvir, 2007 [in Hebrew]. [↑](#footnote-ref-28)
29. Yediot Acharonot, 2 August 2018. [↑](#footnote-ref-29)
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