The central idea of the article is to illuminate a process of “Arabization” or “Easternization” in Israeli society over the past two decades in cultural, sociological, and political terms. This examination forms part of a broader aspiration to frame Israel as a Middle Eastern country (albeit one with unique characteristics). This contrasts with the way Israel is generally studied as a Western island whose characteristics deviate from its Middle Eastern surroundings.

Discourse on Israel – both public and academic – is still replete with analyses relating to the ethnic tension in Israel between ostensibly Western Ashkenazi Jews and Mizrahi (Eastern) Jews, within the context of Israel’s depiction as a Western odd-man-out in the Middle East. Accordingly, research on Israeli society has usually examined it without reference to the surrounding region, and through an affinity to Jewish history and to Zionism, with its European roots. Against this background, Israeli society is generally portrayed as one that is undergoing a process of Americanization/Europeanization. While this description is accurate in some respects, this process itself cannot be divorced from the desire to confront the regional domain in cultural respects and in a dialectical context.

We argue that Israel is becoming increasingly similar to the countries of the Middle East in its essence, and that this phenomenon does not distinguish between Ashkenazim and Mizrahim. Indeed, from the outset Israel’s roots should have led to its comparison to the Middle Eastern countries rather than to the West (despite some differences we will discuss, as noted).

Those scholars who have addressed Israel’s regional context are mainly Orientalists and political scientists who have undertaken comparative studies, particularly concerning aspects of government, diplomacy, and the military. Little if any research has been undertaken into the Middle Eastern context in the social and cultural fields.

In the final analysis, however, it is only natural that the domain/region indeed shape the lives of Israelis, their agenda and language, their tastes and temperament, and so forth. In the first part of our study, we will seek to examine the influences of the region and the ways in which Israeli society is being integrated in – or from the outset formed part of – the Arab domain in various contexts and for diverse reasons.

**Part One**

Regarding the changes that are occurring in Israeli society, we will indicate a number of key aspects. We will illustrate the cultural context, among other ways, through the story of the flourishing of Israeli musicians who sing in Arabic and include Arab motifs in their work, yet who are considered “all-Israeli” (examples include Dudu Tassa, Sarit Hadad, and Dikla). This phenomenon contradicts the way Israeli music with Oriental qualities was defined, at least until the 1990s, as “Mizrahi” music – that is, as something that deviates from Israeliness, so that artists who did not wish to be marginalized were afraid or reticent to use the Arabic language. We will consider, for example, the difference between Ofra Haza, an Israeli star of Yemenite origin in the 1980s who performed Oriental music but completely avoided the use of Arabic, and the band A-W-A, which was formed after the turn of the millennium, and whose members (who are also of Yemenite origin) sing entirely in Arabic, unlike Haza, and have achieved great success.

We will also examine the manner in which the schedules of television stations, movies, restaurants, and places of entertainment have all adopted overt Mizrahi/Arab characteristics over recent decades.

The Easternization of Israel is also apparent in the sociopolitical context. The central electoral power that has brought the Likud to power over the past four decades, almost without interruption, stems from the Mizrahi urban middle classes as well as from Mizrahi Jews in Israel’s periphery. In this context, there can be no doubt that it is the Mizrahim who determine the composition of Israel’s government.

It is no coincidence that Mizrahi politics, which were once considered sectarian, are increasingly penetrating mainstream strongholds. The Labor Party is headed by Avi Gabbai, who is of Moroccan origin; a Mizrahi candidate competed to head Meretz; and the justice minister from the Jewish Home party is of Iraqi origin. The Mizrahi agenda occupies a prominent place in public discourse and the culture minister has proposed an overtly Mizrahi agenda from a populist angle.

Another interesting phenomenon that reflects the Easternization of Israel can be found in the centrist party Kulanu. This party, whose lead Moshe Kahlon serves as finance minister, offers a “gray” Mizrahi agenda that could be termed “Mizrahi Israeliness.” This phenomenon, prevalent among many middle-class Mizrahim, simultaneously preserves and obscures the essence of Mizrahi Israeliness, recognizing that in today’s Israel Mizrahi identity can form the basis for mobility as well as for a predetermined status. Accordingly, this centrist party does not flaunt its Mizrahi character as a clear banner, although its agenda is inherently a Mizrahi political one.

The dominant religious tendency in Israeli – Mizrahi Traditionalism – has also been understood by sociologist Nissim Leon, perhaps surprisingly, as a modern variation (cut off in the case of Jewish Orthodoxy) of Muslim secularism.

A further aspect that reflects the Arabization of Israel is the growing popularity of the term “Arab-Jewish.” This term first emerged in academic discourse in the 1990s. In the 2000s it spread to general public discourse, provoking distaste and rejection among many Israelis, who felt that the term challenges Jewish and Zionist identity. In recent years, however, a number of Mizrahi celebrities and public figures have begun to identify themselves as Arab-Jews – including the spokesperson of the ultra-right-wing soccer team Beitar Jerusalem. By doing so, they have denuded this term of its post-Zionist associations and its original political context – a phenomenon that deserves analysis in its own right.

From a linguistic perspective, too, it can be shown that while from the 1960s on Israeli slang was dominated by the adoption of English expressions, as part of the process of “Americanization,” the new century has seen the adoption of Middle Eastern expressions and concepts both in Hebrew slang and in the formal language – by Ashkenazim and Mizrahim alike.

The article will also discuss additional examples of these phenomena.

**Part Two**

Sociocultural developments in Israel – only some of which have been reviewed here in the research outline – provide an opportunity to examine Israel’s general position in the Middle East.

Assaf David mentions several contexts that reveal similarities between Israel and its neighbors:

* The fact that, like other Middle Eastern countries, Israel was founded through a process of liberation from European colonialism; like the other countries, Israel struggled for its identity against competing identities (religious, pan-Arab or ethnic);
* The fact that, like its neighbors, Israel was developed against the backdrop of the prioritization of security considerations over civilian considerations;
* Like the other countries, Israel shows a strong tension between religion and state and its society has an overtly collectivist character, in contrast to the liberal democracies of the West;
* And, naturally, the fact that Israel has a demographic majority of Jews whose origins lie in the Muslim countries (to which we should add the Eastern character of the Arab citizens of Israel).

Oren Barak has noted the similarity between Israel, Turkey, Lebanon, and Egypt in terms of the “security networks” that exist in these societies. These networks operate through unofficial agents and constitute a dominant factor in the difficulty in consolidating substantive liberal democratic regimes in these countries according to the Western European model.

Johannes Becke notes that the Jewish state is as militarist as Egypt and as ethnocentric as Turkey. Its ethnic and religious fragmentation is reminiscent of Lebanon, while the growing influence of gas tycoons shares some characteristics with the situation in the Gulf principalities.

Becke also positions Israel’s occupation of territories conquered in 1967 as a phenomenon that does not differ substantively from various forms of annexation that have occurred across the Middle East, such as Syrian control over Lebanon (until the Arab Spring) or the annexation of the Western Sahara by Morocco, which also included the establishment of settlements by the occupying power following the Spanish withdrawal from the territory. All these are examples of “post-colonial state expansion” – i.e. changes in borders initiated by a Middle Eastern country following liberation from colonial occupation.

**Part Three: Theory**

Johannes Becke’s studies propose a theoretical framework for examining this subject in the contexts of Occidentalism, exceptionalism, whiteness/whitening, and Allozionism. The following are some of the questions that emerge from his studies:

* Can we connect the notion of Allosemitism and Allozionism to Israel’s character as both Jewish and Arab?
* Does depicting Zionism as a Native-Colonizer movement help to understand Israel as both Arab and Jewish?
* Does Israel’s Arab-Jewish ambiguity help to solve the tension between usurper nationalism and a Dhimmi Rebellion?
* How can we explain the process of “Easternization” in the 21st century?
* Does this phenomenon reflect an understanding that the Ashkenazi hegemony is doomed?
* Or should it be seen in the context of the rise of the right-wing, as a somewhat twisted outcome of the fact that “the aim of Gush Emunim was the de-Europeanization and the de-Westernization of the allegedly Hellenized Zionist project,” as Becke has suggested?
* Can we attribute the process of this Easternization to the original yearning of the conservatives who rule the state toward the “awakening of the East”?

**Part Four: Race, Ethnicity, Nationality**

Israel’s framing as a Middle Eastern country will also facilitate the clarification of complex issues relating to Jewish and Zionist identity in the context of religion, race, and nationality. Can the perception of the Jews’ “ethnicity” and “color” be modified according to the understanding of Israel’s place in the Middle East? Does Easternization have an impact on redefining the Jewish race? Does the Jew, who was black but became white following the Holocaust, once again become black?

What, in fact, is the Jewish color?

Does the return to the East reflect self-confidence in the strength of Israeliness?

Does the Jew always change colors, as Albert Memmi suggested, and has the Jew once again become dark?

Will Israel’s Easternization create a divide between Israeli Jews and the Diaspora Jews of the West, or will this process also influence them? (In New York, Jewish food has given way to the trend for Middle Eastern Israeli food).

Is it possible to distinguish between color, race, and ethnicity?

Is this not a process of Easternization and transition from white to black, but rather a return to the Jews’ original color, which was neither white nor black, and which was always in a liminal state?

Is the process of Easternization/Arabization drawing Zionism back to a basic and original state in which it was influenced by the Cossacks and dreamt of being like the Bedouin? (Israel Bartal)

Does Easternization answer Raif Zarik’s question as to when the settler becomes the native?

How should we understand the process of Easternization over recent decades?

Is Arabization helping to reposition Israel between East and West?

Is Easternization making the Jews a (Semitic) race once again, and not solely a religion?

**Conclusion**

On the need to pursue Israel Studies as part of Middle Eastern Studies.