THE IN-BETWEEN YEARS:
MIZRACHI AND PALESTINIAN VICTIMS IN ISRAEL'S
FORMATIVE PERIOD

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CONTENTS

Thesis Abstract 2

Introduction 3

Part I: Mizrahi Settlement as a Defensive Institution 7

The Absorption of Mizrachim 11

Part II: The Negev and Gaza: Crisis in the Periphery 20

The Political Foundation of the Border Conflict 22

Mizrahi Crisis in the Negev 35

Conclusion 40

Works Cited 43
ABSTRACT

This paper seeks to underscore the destructive effects of the Arab-Israeli border conflict of the 1950's on Mizrachi, or Arabic-speaking Middle Eastern and North African-Jewish, settlers in the Negev and Palestinian refugees in the Gaza Strip. It argues that Mizrachim, who were employed as a population to serve the defensive, demographic, and economic needs of the infant state of Israel, were victims in the border conflict as were Palestinian refugees who suffered under Israel's retaliatory policy. Support for this argument is drawn through the incorporation of sociological examinations on Mizrachi settlement and transformations in early Israeli society and political histories dealing with the early years of Israeli statehood. This paper centers on the histories of the Mizrachi settlers and the Palestinian refugees during Israel's formative years. A focus on these two groups is important given that their histories rarely examined holistically.
INTRODUCTION

Israel's in-between years of the 1950's are often overshadowed in many histories by the Arab-Israeli war of 1948 on one end and the 1956 Suez Crisis on the other. The period falling between these two events was a dynamic one within the history of the Arab-Israeli conflict because it provides an immediate context for the Suez invasion, the first all-out military confrontation between Israel and Nasser's regime in Egypt. Within Israel, the mid 1950's were formative years worthy of analysis because they lay in the heart of a period of transformation in early statehood that preceded the industrialization of the late 1950's and 60's. Most significant to this period of transformation was the absorption of a massive population of Mizrahim, or Arabic-speaking Middle Eastern and North African Jews. Their arrival would permanently alter the social fabric of the nation.

The events of 1948 established the state of Israel and created two refugee crises that entailed a state of prolonged border conflict along armistice lines established subsequently in 1949: one crisis arose with the displacement of the Palestinian refugee population, the other with the resettlement of Mizrahim in outlying areas. ¹ Israel's in-between period was marred by escalation brought on by Israeli retaliation in response to illegal border crossings from Jordan, Egypt, Syria, and Lebanon. Border crossings were usually peaceful and predictable given that most perpetrators were Palestinian refugees revisiting the lands they had formerly inhabited for social and economic reasons. At the same time, violent infiltrators targeted Israeli civilians and infrastructure. Israeli military forces reacted to these attacks with reprisal raids that often inflicted heavy civilian

casualties. Prime minister David Ben-Gurion and his “activist” cohorts, who included defense minister Pinhas Lavon and IDF chief of staff Moshe Dayan, organized these raids. Ben-Gurion carried on with the strikes during his hiatus from the Israeli cabinet.

The reprisal strategy reached a turning point in 1953 at Qibya, Jordan where Israel faced international fallout after the killing of 70 civilians. At this point, even Ben-Gurion and his followers understood that a change in policy was needed. It was soon established that only police and military installations would be targeted in retaliatory raids. Provocation and overreaction did not cease, however. After severe political deterioration between Israel and Nasser’s government in Egypt, the activist retaliatory model escalated. After a bloody Israeli attack on an army barrack in Egyptian-administered Gaza in 1955, Nasser organized and assumed control over Fedayeen who were to focus attacks on the Negev. The Fedayeen wreaked havoc amongst the Mizraim who populated the southern periphery. The Israeli raid on Gaza, which was launched during a period of relative calm, and the Egyptian responses to this offensive, provide the immediate backdrop for the Suez Crisis.

Most histories dealing with the events and conditions that lead to the Suez invasion fail to incorporate the history of the Mizraim in Israel, a population whose resettlement affected the cultural and political dynamics of the state in its early years. Most works dealing with the absorption and settlement of Mizraim are primarily sociological. These examinations, founded in the works of scholars like S.N. Eisenstadt and Georges Friedmann, usually underscore the use of the Mizrahi population in

pursuance of Israel's pioneer mission. These works examine the use of Mizrachim in settling outlying areas and fulfilling the demographic and economic needs of the infant state. After 1948, the Ashkenazim of the Yishuv (Jewish community in Palestine) who had developed national institutions and set up kibbutzim in outlying areas now undertook a new pioneer mission of upward mobility in the state's core population centers. This mobility was now possible after massive Palestinian displacement in the cities, grants of land from the former British mandate, and the arrival of a base of cheap Mizrachi laborers. There were therefore few options for the settlement of outlying areas in the 1950's other than destitute Mizrachi arrivals who were forced to rely on continued government support. With the disruption of government support by way of border violence, Mizrachi settlers endured a dire situation in the Negev and other peripheral regions.

Mizrachi marginalization by Ashkenazim, however, began before Israeli statehood in 1948. Gershon Shafir provides invaluable analysis on the exploitative use of Mizrachi labor in the formative period of the Yishuv. In the early 20th century, the European community of the Second Aliyah (stream of immigration to Palestine) faced a serious dilemma. At this time, Jewish settlers from Europe needed a cheap labor source to farm the land they had appropriated. European Jewish workers were expensive and relatively inexperienced in agriculture. The Yishuv found a solution with the importation of Jewish laborers from Yemen between 1909 and 1914. These workers were skilled in
agriculture and were paid far less than their Ashkenazi peers.\footnote{Shafir, Gershon. *Land, Labor, and the Origins of the Origins of the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict, 1882-1914.* Berkeley and Los Angeles, CA: The University of California Press, 1996. p. 91-120.} Mizrachi exploitation in the Yishuv began with the importation of Yemeni laborers and resurfaced with Mizrachi absorption and settlement at statehood in 1948, a time of uncertainty where conflict raged along unstable borders. I argue that Mizrachi immigrants were employed to serve defensive as well as demographic and economic needs in Israel’s in-between years of the 1950’s. The border conflict was complicated by the dynamics of the immigrant influx joined with social and economic conditions inherent to a developing state.

In the second half of my essay, I will focus on the effects of border violence on the Negev and the Gaza Strip. I will demonstrate that the settlement of the desert was detrimental for Mizrachi immigrants and Palestinian refugees in border areas. A focus on Gaza in the formative years of the refugee crisis is important in understanding how the territory, historically a peripheral zone under the British and Ottoman administrations, became the “nucleus” of Palestinian resistance in the 20th century. The Palestinian resistance movement had its foundations in Gaza from the 1950’s after Egypt’s organization of Fedayeen, from whose ranks emerged PLO founders and other members of the early resistance movement. I will examine the histories of Mizrachi settlers in the Negev and Palestinian refugees in Gaza in order to underscore how border violence created Palestinian and Jewish victims in the determining years of the 1950’s.
Part I

MIZRACHI SETTLEMENT AS A DEFENSIVE INSTITUTION

"Mizrachi" refers to Arabic-speaking Jews from the Middle East and North Africa. "Sephardi", a term often used to describe eastern or "oriental" Jews, refers to those descending from Spain who settled in various regions in the Middle East, North Africa, and Eastern Europe. This group composed the old Yishuv before European immigration in the 1880's. They represented 20 to 25 percent of the population at that time. At least 70% of Mizrachim arrived in Israel after World War I. 4 This stream, and mainly the influx after 1948, is the focus of my essay as opposed to the old Sephardi community in Palestine whose presence in the region dates back much further.

Israeli policy under Ben-Gurion's Labor government sought to bring about "...the settling of 150,000 persons in five hundred new settlements [and] the establishment of a belt of frontier settlement [serving] a decisive role in the security system." 5 For Ben-Gurion, the 1948 war had demonstrated "the supreme military value of border settlements." Wherever there were Israeli settlements, there would be Israeli territory and "wherever Israeli settlement ended, there would be the country's frontiers." 6

With a demographic representation similar to remote northern towns, Arabic-speaking Jews overwhelmingly populated the new settlements in the Negev. As opposed


6 Morris, Border Wars, 123
to larger agricultural settlements and kibbutzim in the periphery, Mizrachim were most often sent to recently established *arayot pithua*, or development towns. A 1961 census affirms the overwhelming Mizrachi representation in such Negev communities: Dimona (84.61 percent Mizrachim), Netivot (99.0), Ofakim (97.1), Kiryat Malachi (94.3), Sderot (95.0), and Yeroham (81.7). Rural settlements and the few outlying urban centers, which included Be’er Sheba, often lacked the infrastructural and military security needed to protect a large population from violent infiltrators and harsh conditions. Despite the grave threat posed to a massive inexperienced immigrant population in the unprotected periphery, Israel’s early government did not express reservations in light of a political impetus to secure the borders and people the outlying areas. Mizrachim in the periphery thus became pawns within the Labor government’s security doctrine of the 1950’s, enduring frequent loss of life during cross-border attacks. Instead of protecting development towns and other vulnerable settlements through the development of defensive institutions, the retaliatory policy was escalated.

Although violent Palestinian infiltrators most often targeted the defenseless Mizrachi inhabitants of development towns, the Ashkenazim of border kibbutzim were lauded in Israeli propaganda for their perceived bravery in defense of the borders. The inhabitants of development towns, who were ignored in such propaganda, far exceeded the inhabitants of the kibbutzim, who represented less than 3 percent of the population.

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7 Gonen, “Frontier”, 153
Although unprotected, higher population development towns contributed more substantially to the Labor government’s defensive strategy.9

The dispersal of Israel’s population before statehood was a major determinant of Mizrachi settlement. In the pre-statehood period, 80% of the Jewish population of the Mandate was in the central regions (Tel Aviv, Haifa, and the areas in-between the cities) and 10% in the Jerusalem area. The centering of population in these regions was largely due to “spontaneous processes” that arose from market forces driving development in urban centers. The opposing model of “spatial policy”, on the other hand, represented a direct government focus on the development of rural settlements. Most of the pre-statehood capital was focused on such settlements. The result of these two opposing models was the out performance of “market forces” over government-driven “spatial policy”. This trend created a geographic periphery with many rural settlements and a small number of urban centers in the Negev and other outlying regions. The pre-Mizrachi European Jews in these regions were generally small in numbers and migratory at statehood. Due to this trend, the peopling of the periphery became the goal of highest priority for the Labor government at statehood. Mizrachim, an immigrant group with few options, were employed to fulfill this goal.10

The Labor government was forced to carry out the settlement policy and support the state’s new arrivals in the midst of a dire economic situation. There was no significant private construction industry to meet the challenge of housing immigrants

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10 Lipshitz, “Spatial Patterns”, 173-174
who arrived in Israel in huge numbers.\textsuperscript{11} The settlement undertaking was burdened by the fact that Israel bore the cost and damage of war. The national deficit was massive, the cost of living was rising fast (accumulating to an increase of 173\% between 1952 and 1960),\textsuperscript{12} and inflation followed suit, increasing by an average rate of 17\%/year between 1948 and 1958. In that decade, the Israeli pound had been devalued by 16\% in relation to the 1948 rate calculated in dollars.\textsuperscript{13} The negative economic effects of war were exacerbated by regional boycott and Egyptian blockade at the Straight of Suez. Although industrialization would develop in the late 50’s and 60’s, Israel endured a particularly desperate economic situation in the early years of statehood.\textsuperscript{14} At this point, the central government had to extend its aid and thus its authority to carry out mass housing projects. The needs of the immigrants created a system in which remote localities became dependant on the central government because there was no other authority from which to receive aid and resources. This dependency stifled local autonomy for many years, leading to underdevelopment and stagnation in development towns and other outlying settlements.\textsuperscript{15}

\textsuperscript{11} Gonen, “Frontier”, 158
\textsuperscript{13} Friedmann, \textit{End of the Jewish People}, 93
\textsuperscript{14} Shohat, “Sephardim”, 19
THE ABSORPTION OF MIZRACHIM

The first stream of immigrants that Israel absorbed as a nation were central Europeans, significantly comprised of survivors of Nazi concentration camps. The arrivals were destitute, often sick, men, women, and children. Although these immigrants had experienced unparalleled hardship, which often went unexpressed in Israeli society, they were Europeans with similar backgrounds to Israel’s elite generation of founders. Their process of absorption was eased by extensive government support and settlement in population centers.\textsuperscript{16}

From November 1948, there were found to be 717,000 Jews and 69,000 non-Jews in Israel. By the end of 1953, the population in both sections had more than doubled. The number of Jews had increased to 1,483,000 and the number of non-Jews amounted to 186,000.\textsuperscript{17} This dramatic increase in the Jewish population largely owes itself to the influx of Mizrachim. In the decade of the 1950’s, 1,000,000 mostly-Mizrachi immigrants migrated to Israel, doubling the nation’s Jewish population between 1948 and 1953.\textsuperscript{18} In these five years, Jews coming from the Middle Eastern nations of Turkey, Syria, Lebanon, Iraq, Iran, Yemen and other countries numbered 282,666 and represented 25% of the post-World War I immigrant population. Of this group, Iraqis and Yemenis were the largest contingent: the former numbering 131,787, the latter 59,689. In the same period, North African Jews coming from Tunisia, Algeria, Morocco, Libya and other nations numbered 101,608 and represented 9% of the post World War I immigrant

\textsuperscript{16} Friedmann, \textit{End of the Jewish People}, 131
\textsuperscript{18} Lipshitz, “Spatial Patterns”, 174
population by 1952. North African immigrants exceeded 80,000 by that year\textsuperscript{19} and would come to represent 44.5\% of the population of settlers in the periphery by 1953.\textsuperscript{20} North African Jews were settled in the Negev in mass, to be discussed later.

Historically, French colonial policy in North Africa varied in its effect on Jewish populations. In 1870, France granted collective citizenship to Algeria's Jews “irrespective of [their] level of French assimilation.”\textsuperscript{21} In Tunisia, the Ottoman system affirmed in 1857 that no legal distinction be made between Tunisian Muslims and Tunisians Jews.\textsuperscript{22} Morocco is a differing model. The French protectorate (1912-56) strongly opposed Jewish efforts to obtain citizenship. Members of the Alliance Israelite Universelle (AIU) and other educated Moroccan Jews were required to undergo a meticulous naturalization process in which applicants obtained citizenship based on their level of French assimilation.\textsuperscript{23} While Algeria was incorporated by the colonial system as part of a larger “metropolitan France,” Morocco and Tunisia were simply protectorates where French policy did not “promote large-scale naturalization policies.”\textsuperscript{24} This condition coupled with French fears of adverse Muslim reactions made Jewish naturalization efforts in the protectorates largely unsuccessful.

The goal of the AIU, an institution prominent throughout North Africa and the Middle East, was to create an elite of French-knowing Jews. The AIU encouraged French cultural assimilation and conferred upon its graduates advantages that Muslims

\textsuperscript{19} Eisenstadt. \textit{Absorption of Immigrants}, 106
\textsuperscript{20} Gonen, “Frontier”, 155
\textsuperscript{22} Laskier, \textit{North African Jewry}, 24
\textsuperscript{23} Laskier, \textit{North African Jewry}, 25
\textsuperscript{24} Laskier, \textit{North African Jewry}, 26
and other groups could not easily obtain. The organization only educated a small percentage of Morocco’s school-aged Jewish children whose families were generally wealthy with ties to France. The vast majority of Morocco’s Jews were uneducated and often illiterate. Although the AIU incorporated Zionism into its teachings, most of those educated under its auspices immigrated to France in the 1950’s instead of Israel.

Zionism had historically existed in North Africa in the form of a messianic movement based on spiritual as opposed to national aspirations. While a strong political movement to create a Jewish national home had developed from discourse and organizational developments in Europe, Zionism in North Africa did not contain a strong national drive until the later influence of the Yishuv.\footnote{Laskier, North African Jewry, ch. 3 (on Aliyah movements and clandestine emigration to Israel)} Immigration to Israel was stimulated by anti-Jewish propaganda and persecution under the pro-Nazi Vichy regime during World War II. After the liberation of North Africa in 1942-1943, communal and Zionist activities re-organized in reaction to post-colonial changes and new threats.\footnote{Laskier, North African Jewry, 84} In 1941, pro-Nazi Muslim groups massacred 179 Jews in Iraq as others were persecuted in German-occupied Tunisia during the war. In response, the Jewish Agency, the Hagana, and the Mosad Le ‘Aliyah dispatched emissaries to Muslim lands to organize youth Aliyah (immigration to Palestine) and self-defense movements. In 1949, a representative of Israel’s Labor government spoke to audiences in Tunis, Sfax, and Sousse about Ben-Gurion’s accomplishments in immigrant absorption, economic development, and housing. The representative made claims about the state’s “flourishing” kibbutzim and
Although Zionist organizations in North Africa, which included the Irgun Tsva’ I Le’ume (IZL) and the Hagana, brought on the clandestine emigration of some North African Jews from 1947-48, most departures came later. At the time of exodus, Eisenstadt describes a North African Jewish community seeking upward mobility while caught between Gentile French colonial society and a rising tide of Arab nationalism. Most of this community, however, chose not to go to Israel. From AIU schooling, wealthier North African Jews were educated and opted to go to France where they could expect “an easier life and material advantages that Israel could not offer.” Most who immigrated to Israel were faced with fewer options. They were composed of “farm workers, small traders, shopkeepers or peddlers.” The largely uneducated Mizrachi immigrants lacked modern professional and technical skills. According to French author Georges Friedmann, these immigrants “had no understanding of or preparation for the institutions of Israeli socialism.” This inexperience was even more significant among Middle Eastern Jews who had not undergone intense processes of colonialism that in preparation for life within the European society of the Yishuv.

It is important to underscore the complex range of historical experiences and types of socialization undergone by North African and Middle Eastern Jews. Certain accounts have inaccurately claimed that Israel saved eastern Jews from the harsh rule of their Arab captors. These Zionist histories are noted to “trace the dots” between a series

27 Laskier, North African Jewry, 279
28 Laskier, North African Jewry, 86-87
29 Italian colonial society is in question in the case of Libya.
30 Eisenstadt, Absorption of Immigrants, 118
31 Friedmann, End of the Jewish People, 150
32 Friedmann, End of the Jewish People, 151
of violent incidents creating a “persecuted whole.” At the same time, other histories present a former Muslim-Jewish coexistence that was only harmonious and happy, supporting the theory that the Jews of Arab lands were unnecessarily uprooted by the forces of Zionism. Both explanations are over simplified and largely shortsighted. Fears of pogroms (perpetuated by operatives of the Yishuv in some accounts) and a precarious economic and social climate after the collapse of colonial rule encouraged exodus. While Zionist propaganda exaggerates the negativity of the situation faced by Jews in Muslim countries, the reality is that Jews in these nations varied in their level of integration into Muslim societies. As noted, in North Africa assimilation into French colonial society took precedence over assimilation into Arab society. Although Mizraḥim endured inequality in Arab lands, the degree of discrimination and repression varied between nations. In some societies, Mizraḥim filled high political positions, offices too prestigious to be attained in Israel. Ella Shohat notes that in “Egypt, Syria, Lebanon, and Tunisia, Jews became members of legislatures, of municipal councils, of the judiciary, and even occupied high economic positions.”

From Israeli statehood in 1948, the process of emigration was facilitated by the Mossad Le ‘Aliya, a division of the Jewish Agency. The organization brought on an exodus of Middle Eastern, North African, and European Jews between 1948 and 1954.

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34 Shohat, “Sephardim”, 9

In the selection process the Mosad Le ‘Aliya evaluated immigrants according to rigorous criteria based on health, economic merits, and ability to work in agriculture, a two-year obligation to which potential settlers had to agree.\textsuperscript{36} The ‘Aliya worked discreetly in French Morocco prior to 1954. Potential immigrants were subject to stringent quotas set by the ‘Aliya and French authorities. Following the collapse of the French protectorate in Morocco, fears of Arab nationalism and uncertainty as to the fate of Moroccan Jewry created an urgency to facilitate mass departure. This resulted in an exodus of Moroccan Jews to Israel in the 1950’s.\textsuperscript{37} According to official French statistics, 69,230 Moroccan Jews departed between 1949 and 1956.\textsuperscript{38}

Similar to Morocco, ‘Aliya operations worked discreetly in the French protectorate to bring Tunisian Jews to Israel. The numbers of emigrants, however, were far less than those coming from Morocco. In 1948-49, 6,200 Tunisian Jews left for Israel; in 1950, 3,725; in 1951, 3,414; in 1952 and 1953, 2,548 and 606 respectively. Political instability in the buildup to Tunisian independence and pressures against Jews based on perceived negative associations with the French strengthened the ‘Aliya movement. In 1955 and 1956 respectively, over 6,000 Tunisian Jews departed. Between 1948 and 1957, over 30,000 Tunisian Jews left for Israel.\textsuperscript{39}

In Algeria, the 1941 Jewish population was 130,000 (mostly French citizens). On the eve of Algerian independence in 1956, the Jewish population increased to

\textsuperscript{37} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{38} Laskier, \textit{North African Jewry}, 126
\textsuperscript{39} Laskier, \textit{North African Jewry}, 265-266
approximately 140,000. Emigration to Israel was not in full swing until the early 1960’s when French rule was transferred to Muslims.\textsuperscript{40}

In the Arab East, a different emigration scenario unfolded. As opposed to the quota-driven absorption system of North Africa, Jews from Yemen, Iraq, and other Middle Eastern nations were earlier met by the ‘Aliya with a “now or never” approach. Fears abounded that Jews would be prevented from leaving and massacred in pogroms. In many accounts, operatives of the Yishuv staged attacks on Jews and blamed them on Arabs. By way of rescue operations, the ‘Aliya was able to facilitate the departure of nearly every Jew in certain Middle Eastern nations.\textsuperscript{41}

Once in Israel, Mizrahim underwent state-sanctioned dispersal. Old communities disintegrated as families and long-time neighbors were separated and settled throughout the country. Many of the new arrivals were placed in ma’aborot (transient camps), agricultural settlements, and city neighborhoods, many of which were recently emptied of Palestinians. By contrast, most central European immigrants were settled in vacated Palestinian homes and apartments in cities like Haifa and Jaffa where they received generous government assistance. The arrival of great numbers of Mizrahim placed a severe strain on Israel. Instead of being settled in coastal towns and cities, Mizrahim were sent to newly created development towns located in the Negev and other remote regions.\textsuperscript{42}

The Mizrahi workforce bolstered the tenuous Israeli economy. In this process, Mizrahim were exploited in Israel’s Ashkenazi-dominated economic system. Mizrahi

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\textsuperscript{40} Laskier, \textit{North African Jewry}, 311
\textsuperscript{41} Laskier, \textit{North African Jewry}, 121
\textsuperscript{42} Shohat, “Sephardim”, 18
workers were valuable for Ashkenazim who were able to achieve a new level of social mobility in white-collar jobs rooted to a base of blue-collar Mizrachi labor. In the 1950's, mass housing was needed due to the influx of immigrants. Mizrachim subsisted in ill-paid positions constructing homes. Ashkenazim profited as managers of construction firms and other positions arising from the mass employment of Mizrachi workers. The cheap labor provided by Mizrachim attracted foreign investment in Israel, a major catalyst for later industrialization. Development towns developed as communities in service to Ashkenazi managers and neighboring Ashkenazi kibbutzim. In kibbutzim, Mizrachim were employed in custodial and other service positions. During industrialization in the late 1950's, many development towns became “company towns” where inhabitants were employed by neighboring factories. The future of the town and its inhabitants became chained to the future of the Ashkenazi-owned and managed local industrial sector.

Despite the benefits Mizrachi labor provided for Ashkenazi social mobility, Israel’s European elite viewed Arabic-speaking arrivals with uncertainty, disdain, and in many accounts inferiority. Despite the fact that they too were overwhelmingly of urban origins, Mizrachim were considered primitive and rural. Israel’s new immigrants threatened the Ashkenazi dream of a homogenous Jewish culture in Israel. Mizrachi cultural practices, which had developed within the sphere of Muslim societies, were thus viewed as incompatible.

43 Investment predominantly from American and European Jews
44 Shohat, “Sephardim”, 19
Coming from diverse cultures and histories, Arab-speaking Jews were generally unfamiliar with and uninspired by the united pioneer movement that Israel's Labor government perpetuated from the time of the early Yishuv. Rejection of Mizrachi culture made adjustments especially difficult and ultimately stifled the cultural autonomy of the immigrant population over time.

The arrival of large numbers of Mizrachi immigrants fundamentally altered makeup of the Israeli population. The influx of tens of thousands fulfilled the Labor government's complex strategy. The immigrants ensured Israel's future Jewish demographic dominance and Mizrachi workers secured the nation's economic future. However, these contributions did not facilitate the group's social and political inclusion. Mizrachi settlement in outlying areas contributed to their exclusion perhaps more than any other factor.

Mizrachim, and particularly those of North African origins, were increasingly settled in the Negev desert where the border conflict became destructive and destabilizing for both the group and Palestinian refugees. Mizrachi arrivals in the Negev and other border areas were employed to fill defensive needs in the uncertain period of early Israeli statehood. The disruption of government support in outlying areas proved detrimental and lead to unstable migratory populations in development towns and other peripheral settlements. In the next chapter, I will trace the history of the border conflict in the Negev and Gaza and the relatively unexamined role of Mizrachi settlers in its evolution.
Part II

THE NEGEV AND GAZA: CRISIS IN THE PERIPHERY

Although border violence flared in regions spanning from Israel’s southern tip to the Galilee, the Negev serves as the regional focus of my essay because it represents the ultimate pioneer undertaking expressed as kibbush hashmama, the conquest of the desert. The settlement of the Negev after statehood, however, completely diverted from the egalitarianism encouraged by the early Yishuv in pursuance of this particular pioneer feat. A 1954-55 almanac of contemporary domestic developments in Israel expresses a common outlook on the conquest of the desert:

The extremely low [population density] of the Negev shows that this is the region of the future. With the flow of water and with further mineralogical prospecting, many opportunities will open there for rural development.  

Ben-Gurion once declared, “there is room for only one Prime Minister, but for those who make the desert bloom there is room for hundreds, thousands and even millions.” With this mantra, Ben-Gurion expressed that the settlement of the Negev was one of the most significant barriers to the realization of the Jewish national dream. He even attempted to set an example and rekindle the pioneer movement of the Yishuv by retiring in the Negev kibbutz Sdeh Boker. At the time of Ben-Gurion’s retirement in 1954, however, the deserts bloomed only with blood. The “thousands and even millions” were not the industrious united pioneers that Ben-Gurion likely envisioned but rather

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destitute Mizrachi immigrants with few options. Mizrachim were hurled into conflict with Palestinian refugees in Gaza for the purposes of defense and population distribution. As in other areas, Mizrachim were "spatially marginalized" through their cultural and geographic positioning between Arab and Jew, limiting "their potential economic, social, and cultural participation." 47 Between 1953 and 1959, when the two biggest immigrant populations were Moroccan and Polish, 30% more of the former were sent to development towns. 48 Mizrachi dispersal proved that Israel's Ashkenazi policy makers favored territorial settlement over the integration of the state's new immigrant population. 49

With the escalation of violence in the Gaza Strip and the Negev in the mid 1950's, a focus on the southern frontier can be used to understand the role of the Gaza Strip as the "nucleus" of Palestinian resistance in the latter half of the 20th century. After the Israeli raid on Gaza in 1955, the Egyptian government selected Gazan refugees for units of Fedayeen to take part in operations against Israel, bestowing upon these infiltrators military experience and training. Many of the Egyptian-trained Fedayeen became active against Israeli military occupation from 1967. 50 These Fedayeen were largely responsible for the creation of the modern Palestinian resistance movement. In my essay, I will demonstrate how the crisis in the Gaza Strip and the Negev was detrimented Mizrachi settlers and Gaza's Palestinian refugees. I hope to join the histories of these groups, which are rarely examined holistically.

47 Yiftachel, "Politics Israel/Palestine", 137
48 Shabi, We Look Like the Enemy, 64
49 Gonen, "Frontier", 156
THE POLITICAL FOUNDATION OF THE BORDER CONFLICT

After the establishment of the armistice agreements in 1949, the view of the Israeli cabinet, Foreign Ministry, and Defense Ministry was that the state needed more people, not more land.\(^{51}\) Regardless of the Revisionist forces of Menachem Begin’s Herut party which sought to reclaim Biblical Judea as part of Israel, the status quo set by Ben-Gurion’s Labor government maintained that Israel should be a “democratic Jewish state without the whole Land of Israel.”\(^{52}\) Ben-Gurion noted that the annexation of Biblical Judea would require the expulsion of the territory’s Arab inhabitants given that they would far exceed the Jews. Ben-Gurion further maintained that it was not Israel’s responsibility to establish a Palestinian state for the 700,000 refugees.

The armistice agreements were interpreted very differently between Israel and her Arab neighbors. The Jewish state maintained its right to an absolute cease-fire, binding on civilians and “irregular forces” in addition to regular armies. Secondly, Israel upheld that the armistice lines be treated as international borders for all intents and purposes, pending the conclusion of final peace agreements. This meant full sovereignty over Israeli territory minus the introduction of armed forces into the demilitarized zones. Lastly, Israel maintained that it had the right to “settle Jews on all the land within its domain and to develop the economy without taking into account the rights of the previous owners who had become refugees.”\(^{53}\) The Arab nations maintained that no agreements terminated the state of war, which granted Arab nations the legal impetus to “deny Israel freedom of navigation, [impose] an economic boycott on it, and [wage] a propaganda

\(^{52}\) Shlaim, *Iron Wall*, 55
\(^{53}\) Shlaim, *Iron Wall*, 56-57
campaign against it."53 Second, the Arab nations stated that the armistice lines were only cease-fire lines and not international borders and that Israel therefore was restricted from developing the demilitarized zones. Third, they stated that "the armistice did not cancel the rights of displaced Palestinians to return to their lands and that Israel's use of that land was therefore not legitimate," further claiming that the Palestinians were entitled to struggle against the occupation of their land. They further argued that, "the Arab states were under no obligation to curb this struggle."53 These fundamental disagreements ensured a reoccurrence of conflict that would spark with cross-border violence. The vast majority of border incidents, however, took place when Palestinian refugees peacefully revisited the lands they had formerly inhabited. Most often, the refugees sought to cultivate their crops, visit family members, or fulfill other social and economic needs. At times, however, violent infiltrators murdered Israeli civilians in frontier areas. Disproportionate Israeli reprisals were carried out under the allegation that Arab governments were at best doing nothing to curb illegal border crossings and at worst directly aiding the violent infiltrators.

The Labor government's decision to retaliate in force after cross-border incidents escalated conflict at the frontier, which was an inevitable result of the displacement of the Palestinian population. With this escalation, Palestinian refugees and Mizrachi settlers were placed in mutual conflict despite their similar backgrounds. Ben-Gurion once stated that "if [Israel] cannot get real peace for ten years or twenty years, [the nation] can stand it, and there will be some blessing in it too."54 With this statement, David Hirst suggests

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that peace with Jordan, Egypt, Syria, and Lebanon in the early stages of statehood could have disastrously affected Israel’s Labor government. It is likely that if peace had been achieved between 1952 and 1953, Mizrachi populations would have returned to their home nations in the face of difficult social and economic adjustments. According to Hirst, if peace had been achieved early Mizrachi settlers “would have lost their sense of crisis and purpose.”  

This “sense of crisis and purpose” could not be cultivated in an environment of reconciliation between Israel’s Jewish immigrants and those the state deemed enemies. The findings of S.N. Eisenstadt, affirming that less than one percent of immigrants departed within the first four years of statehood, support the early successes of the Labor government in ensuring that the Mizrachi exodus was a permanent population transition.  

At statehood, there was a larger population of Palestinians who were situated in Israel and in refugee camps along the armistice lines. During this period, 700,000 of the country’s Palestinian inhabitants lived in refugee camps in the Arab nations that surrounded Israel. The influx of Palestinian refugees placed a significant strain upon the economies of these neighboring Arab nations. After the events of 1948, the West Bank had come under Jordanian control. By 1948, the population of the West Bank had grown from 400,000 to more than 700,000. Around a third of the Palestinian refugees ended up in refugee camps, “another third in villages, and the remainder in towns.”  

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55 Ibid.  
57 Shlaim, *Iron Wall*, 54  
58 Kimmerling and Migdal, *Palestinian People*, 217
Kimmerling and Migdal argue, “only in the Gaza Strip was the pressure caused by the influx of refugees more intense than in Jordan.”

Gaza had long been a peripheral corner of Palestine, the poorest region during the British Mandate. While Jordan had annexed the West Bank, Egypt had not annexed Gaza and the territory remained in political “limbo” where the “permanence of temporariness” became an emblem in local society. In 1948, the All Palestine Government was established with Gaza City as its capital. The establishment of the government was a triumph that was to be short lived. Given that the All Palestine government only represented a remnant of Palestinian territory, key officials soon departed for Jordan and by 1952 the government was dissolved.

After 1948, poverty devastated the Gaza strip where “personal income was among the lowest in the world (one source put the figure at $80 per capita per year).” In the twenty years after Israeli statehood, Gaza poverty was worsened by intense isolation. Migration to Egypt was restricted and the Egyptian military administered emergency law until 1962. Nasser’s government was fearful of the effects of a Palestinian influx on political stability and the level of competition in the Egyptian workforce. To the west, Israel reacted harshly to border crossings as the government sought to make the armistice lines created in 1949 international borders. Due to Gaza’s isolation and Egyptian repression in local government, the territory was never able to develop as a “center of new Palestinian institution building, despite the fact that it held the second largest concentration of Palestinians.”

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60 Kimmerling and Migdal, *Palestinian People*, 230
Given the devastating poverty suffered in the Gaza strip from 1948 and the isolation imposed on the territory by the Egyptian administration, large-scale “economic infiltration” into Israel was common among Palestinian refugees. Border crossers visited family, tended farmland, and fulfilled other social and economic needs across the armistice lines. The IDF often reacted harshly to peaceful border crossings, adopting a free-fire policy. In the period of 1949-56, between 2,700 and 5,000 illegal border crossers were killed. Before Israel’s retaliatory strikes arrived at their definitive form of small-unit infantry attacks on villages thought to harbor violent infiltrators and medium to large-unit attacks on Arab police and army positions, mortar attacks, air force strafing, infantry raids, and mining were common. One of the first retaliatory strikes after the 1948 war took place in Gaza to the east of Beit Hanun and the village of ‘Abasan after numerous refugee crossings. Most were farmers cultivating their fields and groves in Israel. In response to this “economic infiltration,” the IDF mortared ‘Abasan without warning, hitting several houses on October 7, 1949. Villagers fled their homes in a state of panic. The next week, the IDF mortared the eastern outskirts of Beit Hanun and pursued and shot several Palestinian farmers as they attempted to cross back into the Gaza Strip. With these attacks, the Egyptian government urged Israel to stop attacking border crossers and instead “return them to Egypt... for punishment.”

Although most border incidents in the early 1950’s occurred between the IDF and Palestinian refugees in Jordan, the retaliatory policy was devastating for the Egyptian-administered Gaza Strip early on. Between 1949 and 1956, Israel launched more than

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61 Shlaim, *Iron Wall*, 82
62 Morris, *Border Wars*, 198-199
seventeen military raids in one form or another on Egyptian held territory.\textsuperscript{63} Israeli attacks ultimately made Palestinian and Egyptian demands for action impossible for Nasser to ignore.

Unit 101, an elite IDF squadron, led most retaliatory strikes after its establishment in early 1953. Israeli “activists” who sought to establish a specialized reprisal unit after several botched IDF operations encouraged the creation of the squadron.\textsuperscript{64} One particular botched operation was \textit{Nakam Veshilem} (“Vengeance and Reprisal”) where Israeli forces were forced to withdraw from a targeted village in Jordan, leaving behind munitions.\textsuperscript{65} Foreign Minister Moshe Sharett and other moderates on the civilian side opposed Unit 101, a squadron pushed for by IDF chief of staff Moshe Dayan. The moderates feared the prospects of an “independent, private army” under Dayan’s control.\textsuperscript{66} After violent infiltrations into Israel throughout the summer of 1953, Unit 101 engaged in its first combat mission with an attack on the Bureij refugee camp in central Gaza on the night of August 28/9, 1953. The raid took place less than two weeks after an attack in Ashkelon in which a restaurant owner was killed and his daughter severely injured.\textsuperscript{67} The reprisal, which was conducted by two brigades, resulted in the deaths of 43 Palestinians. Leslie Carver, the acting director of the UNRWA, stated that the incident “caused intense alarm and unrest in the whole Strip.”\textsuperscript{68}

\textsuperscript{63} Sachar, \textit{History of Israel}, 449 (based on United Nations reports)
\textsuperscript{64} Morris, \textit{Border Wars}, 249
\textsuperscript{65} Morris, \textit{Border Wars}, 237
\textsuperscript{66} Hirst, \textit{Olive Branch}, 180-81
\textsuperscript{67} Morris, \textit{Border Wars}, 255
\textsuperscript{68} Morris, \textit{Border Wars}, 256
The Bureij attack was soon followed by Unit 101’s forced expulsion of Bedouin families of the ‘Azazme tribe from the Negev’s Auja demilitarized zone into Egypt. The expulsion was carried out after Dayan claimed that the ‘Azazme served Egyptian intelligence and committed acts of sabotage and mining in Israel. In the operation to expel the ‘Azazme, Unit 101 exchanged fire with Bedouins, shooting several. The squadron also burnt tents and destroyed other property. Members of the ‘Azazme were likely the perpetrators of a later attack on an Israeli bus in the Negev which took place on March 17, 1954. Despite the evidence revealing this, Israel attempted to pin the blame for the incident on infiltrators from Jordan. A U.S. State Department account of a joint U.S.-Egyptian investigation of the bus incident, in which ‘Azazme tribesman in Sinai were interviewed, indicates that after the expulsion Israel began “repopulating the Auja demilitarized zone with parts of Arab tribal families residing in the Beersheba area.” It is alleged that by this “hostage system,” the Israelis were seeking “to carry out their policy of taking over the demilitarized zone completely and assuring themselves of the loyalty and good behavior of the inhabitants.” This development attests to the multifaceted nature of the Labor government’s doctrine of border defense in the 1950’s. Instead of garrisoning a population of vulnerable Mizrachim in the dangerous frontier of the Auja zone, a tactic employed elsewhere, Israel positioned a tribal population loyal to the state that could serve the Labor government’s security needs in the desert fringes. The Labor government was able to carry out this “hostage system” because certain Bedouin groups

69 Morris, Border Wars, 257
maintained good relations with Israel. Political bonds with the state gave tribes advantages as they vied against encroaching tribes and sub-tribes for exclusive possession of pastures and wells.\textsuperscript{71}

The 1953 Bureij raid and the ‘Azazme expulsion continued a trend of violent escalation in Gaza that was started at statehood with the IDF strikes in ‘Abasan and Beit Hanun. In the face of severe overpopulation and confinement by Egyptian authorities, offensives generated in the Gaza refugees “a hatred against Israel more unremitting than that of any other émigré concentration elsewhere on Israel’s borders.”\textsuperscript{72} As Illana Feldman notes, the Egyptian administration in Gaza, as well the British Mandate before it, adopted a style of “tactical government” where events, like Israeli strikes, were coped with as they arose. Only a “strategic government” in Gaza could deal with the instability plaguing the territory.\textsuperscript{73} The Egyptian administration did not provide the resources to effectively govern the Strip and support the Palestinian refugee population. The Egyptian administration in the early 1950’s focused on a domestic policy that did not provide for the Palestinian refugees under its control. Both the Egyptian and the earlier British administration faced a delicate situation in the Strip. During the mandate, the British were charged with maintaining order and completing the contradictory undertakings of developing Palestine and establishing a Jewish National Home. The Egyptian administration, which came into Gaza after the failed attempt to reclaim Palestine in 1948, was forced to maintain a balance between responding to Palestinian appeals in the

\textsuperscript{71} Morris, \textit{Border Wars}, 166
\textsuperscript{72} Sachar, \textit{History of Israel}, 449
region and fulfilling the domestic mission of Nasser’s revolutionary movement. As Nasser stated on countless instances in the first years of his rule, all-out conflict with Israel would be detrimental to the regime’s domestic aims and was thus undesirable. Nasser’s January 1955 assessment affirms this:

“Israel’s policy is aggressive and expansionistic… However, we do not want to start any conflict. War has no place in the constructive policy which we have designed to improve the lot of our people. We have much to do in Egypt… A war would cause us to lose… much of what we seek to achieve.”

Following Ben-Gurion’s resignation from office in December 1953, Moshe Sharett, formerly Israel’s foreign minister, took power. Sharett governed until Ben-Gurion returned to the cabinet 12 months later. Although Sharett was not directly subject to Ben-Gurion’s will during this period, Lavon and Dayan closely monitored his actions and kept the briefly retired prime minister updated on developments.

While border strikes destabilized Gaza early on, the border conflict escalated dramatically after the Israeli attack on the Jordan village of Qibya. The 1953 retaliatory raid on the village and the violence precipitating it provoked Ben-Gurion and his “activists” to declare a state of emergency at Israel’s borders. The state of emergency lent added importance and urgency to the task of settling people in politically volatile outlying areas as a way of securing the borders and attaining political stability in the frontier. Although Ben-Gurion hoped to revitalize Israel’s veteran pioneer movement in the Negev, an undertaking he epitomized with his retirement at Sdeh Boker, the vast

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74 Morris, Border Wars, 286
75 Morris, Border Wars, 306
majority of settlers in these areas were reluctant Mizrachi immigrants.\textsuperscript{76} Thus, it was usually the Mizrachim who endured the hardships of escalated conflict on the Israeli side of the border.

The Qibya raid was carried out after a string of grenade attacks by perpetrators crossing from Jordan. The attacks climaxed with the death of a mother and two children on October 13 in the Israeli settlement of Yehud. Although the Jordanian government sought to aid in the arrest of the perpetrators, going so far as to invite Israeli trackers across the armistice lines, a reprisal operation took form.\textsuperscript{77} The action, orchestrated and ordered by Ben-Gurion in consultation with Lavon and Dayan, was carried out without the approval of Prime Minister Sharett. On the night of October 14, a unit of 130 Israeli soldiers lead by Ariel Sharon attacked the border town of Qibya resulting in the deaths of 70 civilians, two-thirds of whom were women and children, and the demolishing of 50 homes. In the course of the operation, Israeli soldiers skirmished with Jordanian National Guardsmen, resulting in the deaths of 12. The IDF suffered no casualties.\textsuperscript{78}

As Abba Eban noted, the Qibya raid resulted in a “terrible deterioration” in Israel’s standing in the United States and the international community. Eban believed that a repeat of the massacre would bring on “British military intervention with American support.”\textsuperscript{79} Ben-Gurion said that he had not been consulted on the operation and he shifted the blame to border settlers, insisting that the IDF and the state be absolved.\textsuperscript{80}

\textsuperscript{76} Gonen, “Frontier”, 158-159
\textsuperscript{77} Morris, \textit{Border Wars}, 257-258
\textsuperscript{78} Morris, \textit{Border Wars}, 260
\textsuperscript{79} Morris, \textit{Border Wars}, 268
\textsuperscript{80} Morris, \textit{Border Wars}, 270
Mizrachi immigrants, who comprised the majority of border settlers, thereby became unwilling victims and aggressors in the border conflict. Ben-Gurion’s deceitful shifting of blame, which now seems farcical, attests to the ease with which the Labor government used the Mizrachi settler population to further political goals.

While border crossings and incidents gradually declined along the Israeli-Jordanian border, the same was not true along the Israel’s border with Gaza, where violence sharply increased in 1954. By the following year, the Gaza Strip had become the main focus of Arab-Israeli hostilities.  

From early 1954, Worsening economic conditions in Gaza provoked increasing numbers of illegal border crossings by refugees seeking to reach the Hebron Hills via the northern Negev. “Economic infiltration”, as described earlier, increased during this period. Attacks on Israeli settlements intensified with many carried out in broad daylight when they had previously only taken place at night. Additionally, Egyptian reconnaissance missions provoked reprisal and lead to additional military and civilian casualties. The increased violence spurred a wave of departures by the Jewish residents of towns in the Negev, predominantly composed of Middle Eastern and North African immigrants. In an effort to deal with the situation, the northern Negev regional council appealed for more settlement guards.  

Dayan alarmingly predicted “a complete collapse in the [border] settlements” if a large-scale retaliatory raid was not carried out. Just as often-unfounded fears of pogroms and instability in the Middle East and North Africa encouraged Mizrachim departure, similar forces began to drive migration from

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81 Morris, Border Wars, 329
82 Ibid.
83 Morris, Border Wars, 332
vulnerable Negev settlements. The burdens placed on an unprepared population in the
desert were severely worsened by the destruction of infrastructure and added risks posed
by violent infiltrations from Gaza.

The Gaza raid of late February 1955 was carried out after severe political
deterioration between Israel and Egypt. Tension between the two nations climaxed with
the subsequently named Lavon Affair, in which a group of Egyptian Jews attempted
bombings in Cairo at the behest of Lavon and the Israeli intelligence services. The
operation was designed to bring about British military intervention in Egypt in the lead
up to Egyptian nationalization of the Suez Canal. After the trial and hanging of two of
the perpetrators, a desire for revenge gripped the upper echelons of the IDF. In late
February 1955, Ben-Gurion and Dayan met with Prime Minister Sharett to plan a
retaliatory strike to be committed against an Egyptian army camp on the outskirts of Gaza
City. The operation was agreed upon after Ben-Gurion and Dayan promised few
casualties. The raid took place on the night of February 28. In the resulting firefight,
fourteen Egyptian soldiers were killed and fifteen wounded. Additionally, a 7-year-old
Palestinian boy and an adult fell victim. In an adjoining action, the IDF ambushed and
killed twenty-two Egyptian soldiers and wounded thirteen on the Khan Yunis-Gaza
road.84

The Gaza raid immediately resulted in a boosting of Israeli morale. It re-
energized the “activists” around Dayan and it undercut Sharett and other moderate forces
in the Israeli cabinet. In Gaza’s refugee camps, riots against Egyptian authorities and the
UNRWA and UNTSO flared. During the rioting, Egyptian police killed four Palestinian

84 Morris, Border Wars, 342
demonstrators and a number of supposed instigators were jailed, including Muhammad Yusuf al Najjar (one of the future heads of the PLO) and Munir a Reis (soon to be named mayor of Gaza).\textsuperscript{85} Nasser and his administration were badly shaken by the Israeli strike, and his government’s policy of restraint was soon dramatically reversed. Egyptian intelligence officials began organizing a Fedayeen battalion through the recruitment of Palestinians in Gaza and later in Jordan, Lebanon, and Syria. Although the Egyptian administration recruited Gazan Fedayeen from 1954, their offensives were “sporadic” and “amateur.” In 1955, systematic Fedayeen murder and sabotage raids were organized from Cairo by the Egyptian army.\textsuperscript{86} This development devastated Israel’s vulnerable Negev periphery. In 1954, seven Israelis were killed and forty-three wounded along the Gaza border. The following year, after Egyptian organization of Fedayeen, forty-eight were killed and 144 wounded. Mining attacks along the border increased from nine in 1954 to forty-nine in 1955.\textsuperscript{87}

Israel’s 1955 attack on Gaza represents a turning point in the history of the border conflict. In response to widespread appeals from Egyptians and Palestinians, the loudest from Gaza’s refugee camps, Nasser assumed direct control over Fedayeen operations. The border conflict in the Negev generated a crisis detrimental for Palestinian refugees in Gaza, Mizrachi settlers, and Nasser’s own revolutionary movement. Seeing an opportunity to restore the pride lost after the events of 1948, Nasser struck back against Israel. Belligerency, unfortunately, undercut the president’s domestic mission.

\textsuperscript{85} Morris, \textit{Border Wars}, 343-344
\textsuperscript{86} Morris, \textit{Border Wars}, 354
\textsuperscript{87} Morris, \textit{Border Wars}, 350
MIZRACHI CRISIS IN THE NEGEV

The common political history of the conflict along the Israel-Gaza border describes the events of violence and political turbulence that brought crisis to Israel’s Negev border settlements from 1954. This crisis lead to a wave of departures and numerous other hardships in the periphery. The common history of the border conflict, however, largely neglects the Mizrahi background of the border settlers in these areas. Sociological examinations of North African settlement in the Negev of the 1950’s, on the other hand, often describe deteriorating conditions and departures but rarely tie them to contemporary political developments.

In the 1950’s, the primary inhabitants of the Negev border development towns as well as older agricultural towns (or moshavim) were Arabic-speaking Jews. Kibbutzim, collective settlements mostly populated by Ashkenazim, became sparse in numbers in comparison to development towns and moshavim. At the time of the establishment of the state, there were a total of 291 agricultural settlements, 149 kibbutzim and 142 agricultural development towns. During the years of 1948-1964 a total of 432 new agricultural settlements were established mostly by the Land Settlement Department of the Jewish Agency, an organization that existed within the power structure of Israel’s Labor government. Of these settlements, 282 were agricultural development towns and 108 were kibbutzim.88 With the settlement policy of the Jewish Agency, unsuccessful attempts were made to ingather an amalgam of Jews from the Middle East and North Africa to create new national bonds in a “melting pot.” After the failure of the this

strategy, a tendency developed to settle development towns with people originating from the same country in order to create a homogenous population, although regional differences between immigrants from the same nation often created tension. By 1971, this strategy had produced 84 development towns populated by North Africans, 39 by Iraqis and Iranians, 31 by Yemenis, and other towns populated by Mizrachim of various origins.\textsuperscript{89} Despite its shortcomings, the "melting pot" strategy made certain inroads in the Negev. Because most of the desert development towns were established in clusters, social interaction between members of different communal backgrounds easily facilitated.\textsuperscript{90} The high number of departures, however, counteracted this development. The first wave of settlers in outlying Negev towns often emigrated due to harsh conditions and government neglect.

With the fall of the French protectorate in Morocco in 1954, Moroccan Jewish immigration was in full swing by 1955 and emigration from other North African nations was prevalent from several years before. By September 1953, recent immigrants from North Africa peopled 44.5 percent of the population of Israel’s peripheral districts.\textsuperscript{91} The Jewish Agency often settled Moroccans and other North Africans in the Negev. With these immigrants in mind, the Israeli government launched Operation “From the Boat to the Town,” whereby immigrants were taken from trucks straight to the “development-towns-to-be.” They were given no choice where they settled and they were often transported at night so that they would not see the pitiful state of their new homes and

\textsuperscript{89} Shapiro, \textit{Rural Settlements}, x
\textsuperscript{91} Gonen, “Frontier”, 155
refuse to leave the transportation vehicle. In Sderot, a Northern Negev town, a settlement manager of the Jewish Agency recalled being given orders, speaking in French or Moroccan, to convince everyone to get off the truck. The manager next released the vehicle quickly so that the immigrants could climb back on.\textsuperscript{92} The “Boat to the Town” policy attests to the reluctance of Mizrahim to live and labor in the Negev, much less defend the territory from violent infiltrators.

Moshav Shikma, a development town founded in 1953 west of Be’er Sheba, provides a specific case study. Sociologist Naomi Nevo describes the community as a “typical Northern Negev moshav” where conditions were “neither worse nor better than those existing in other agricultural settlements in the area.”\textsuperscript{93} Shikma was founded by 26 families from Morocco. Emigration from the town was very common from its founding due to harsh adjustments and government neglect, as experienced by Mizrahi immigrants throughout Israel. The settlement became an unstable community in regard to population movement, and between 1953 and 1961 28 families departed.\textsuperscript{94} Although Nevo’s study does not incorporate political developments in the 1950’s, contemporary Fedayeen attacks in the area disrupted infrastructure including transportation links vital to such destitute Negev towns. Shikma is situated just north of Carmiyah, another immigrant community that suffered a violent Fedayeen attack in 1954 (to be discussed later).

\textsuperscript{92} Shabi, \textit{We Look Like the Enemy}, 56
In the period following the 1955 Gaza raid, the Fedayeen "aimed to demolish Israeli military and economic targets and murder inhabitants" among other objectives. Nasser hoped "to create an intensive atmosphere of fear" in Israel. In addition to shaking the confidence of the Israeli army and government, Fedayeen operations of sabotage and demolition were launched to sever transport links and cause overall panic in Israel's periphery.  

Nasser also sought to encourage emigration from and discourage further immigration to the Jewish state. Although the latter aims were questionably successful, the Fedayeen demolished numerous military and economic targets and created an "intensive atmosphere of fear," though not among the influential Ashkenazim responsible for the retaliatory policy. These Israelis of European origins were largely detached from the vulnerable periphery that bore the brunt of border violence. Instead, reluctant Mizrachim became frequent targets of Fedayeen attacks. The destruction of supply links to outlying areas devastated development towns suffering desperate conditions before the escalation of conflict in the periphery. Perhaps there is some reason to believe that had Nasser known the makeup and circumstances of the Jewish population in the periphery, he would not have targeted them. It is possible to infer this from the warm relations Nasser maintained with Avicham Cohen, a Yemeni Israeli officer with whom he negotiated when his brigade was pinned down in the Fallujah pocket during the war of 1948.  

I will now examine some of the specific Fedayeen attacks targeting Negev areas overwhelmingly populated by Mizrachim. The Palestinian attack on an Israeli civilian

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95 Morris, *Border Wars*, 360  
96 Nasser mentions Cohen in his *Philosophy of the Revolution*
vehicle near Moshav Carmiyah in August 1954 represented an everyday incident.97 Carmiyah is situated among several immigrant development towns south of Ashkelon,98 an immigrant agricultural settlement that replaced several vacated Palestinian towns.99 During the August 1955 Fedayeen campaign, water installations were destroyed near the Erez crossroads north of Gaza near Ashkelon.100 Later the same month, Ashkelon itself came under Fedayeen attack with one soldier killed and two others wounded. Following the Fall 1956 Suez invasion, five Israelis were killed in Sderot when their vehicle hit a mine planted by Fedayeen. Although the origins of the victims are not noted, 95% of Sderot’s population by 1961 was of Middle Eastern and North African origin. The acts of sabotage and violence against these communities primarily affected their Mizrahi residents. Coupled with harsh social and economic conditions, destruction of infrastructure and the psychological effects of violence undoubtedly increased departures and instability in peripheral towns already in dire straits.

97 Morris, Border Wars, 330
98 Gonen, “Frontier”, 152 (map detailing locations of immigrant moshavim settlements, 1948-1953)
99 Gonen, “Frontier”, 153
100 Morris, Border Wars, 361
CONCLUSION

The arrival of Mizrachim fundamentally changed the cultural dynamics of the state of Israel during its formative period. Departing from diverse regions under varying circumstances, the North African and Middle Eastern arrivals were vastly different than any other immigrant stream the Yishuv had absorbed. Israel’s Labor government, under intense strain caused by negative economic fallout from war and conflict along unstable borders, undertook the settling of a massive destitute population unaccustomed to life in the Yishuv. Under the Labor government’s settlement policy, Mizrachim underwent community disintegration and repression of cultural practices that had developed in the societies of Israel’s Arab enemies. The pioneer mission of settlement in the periphery was imposed upon the reluctant immigrant population of Arabic-speaking Jews. The defensive, economic, and demographic needs of the state were fulfilled by Mizrachi arrivals at the cost of their marginalization. By their placement in the periphery, Mizrachim were largely excluded from Israel’s Ashkenazi society, which enjoyed upward mobility in the 1950’s.

Mizrachim in the Negev and other outlying depended heavily on government support, which lead to crisis when it could not be provided. This reliance was an inevitable condition for several reasons: first, because Mizrachi arrivals had little to no resources of their own. Second, because the outlying areas of settlement had been established and maintained under the auspices of the Labor government without self-sufficiency. Third, because many if not most of the Mizrachi settlers were inexperienced in agriculture and reluctant to fulfill the pioneer mission of the Yishuv. As operation “From the Boat to the Town” attests, this mission was forced upon the arrivals. The
Mizrachi crisis in the Negev, a peripheral zone detached from Israel’s core population centers by miles of desert, worsened after Fedayeen destabilization of government support systems. When supply lines were destroyed Mizrachim could not receive the aid vital to their existence in the vulnerable periphery. Absent of Fedayeen disruption, the providing of aid was tenuous at best due to desperate economic conditions in Israel at statehood. After severe instability brought on by violent infiltrations, Negev settlements reached a state of decay where populations became unstable and migratory.

In the Palestinian refugee camps in Gaza, overpopulation and Egyptian repression catalyzed the resistance movement and established the Strip as its nucleus. As in other border areas, Israeli overreaction to illegal border crossings escalated violence. With the Egyptian training and control of Gazan Fedayeen, we see the invigoration of the PLO and other Palestinian resistance organizations that shaped the Arab-Israeli conflict in the 20th century. The attacks launched by Fedayeen in the wake of the 1955 Israeli raid on Gaza targeted those who were socially and politically distanced from Israel’s decision makers. In this way, the border conflict and its escalation made victims and aggressors out of Palestinian refugees and Mizrachi settlers.

The reciprocal effects of Mizrachi immigrants on the border conflict has been largely neglected in Israel’s overarching historical narrative despite recent reexaminations that refute Zionist myths about the formation of the state and the creation of the Palestinian refugee crisis. As sociologist Clare Louise Ducker points out, these reexaminations have failed to underscore the many injustices committed against Jews
from the Arab world.\textsuperscript{101} It must be accepted that Mizrahi settlers were brought into the vortex of the Arab-Israeli conflict at statehood where they served the defensive as well as the demographic and economic needs of the young state. It is vital to bridge the divide between the sociology of immigrant settlement constructed by S.N. Eisenstadt and other scholars and the crucially reexamined historiography offered by the "revisionist" historians.

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