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Disillusioned defenders? The integration challenges of American Jewish return migrants in the Israel Defense Forces

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Abstract

There is a consensus within the ethnic return migration literature that ethnic migrants experience difficulty integrating into the ethnic homeland due to (1) state policies that inhibit permanent settlement and upward mobility and (2) social marginalization from the native-born community. Absent those experiences, one would expect that ethnic migrants would smoothly integrate and be a successful example of nation-building for the homeland. This paper examines lone soldiers in Israel (immigrants who do not have immediate family in the country) as an example of an immigrant group that is provided with substantial government support for integration and is publicly heralded by Israeli media as model citizens. Based on 52 interviews with former lone soldiers, this paper argues that even in an “extreme case” of state- and society-supported ethnic return, lone soldiers feel marginalized due to their disillusionment with Israeli state politics and linguistic, behavioural and cultural boundaries between themselves and Israelis.

KEYWORDS

ethnic return migration, ethnicity, immigration, Israel, nation-building

1 | INTRODUCTION

Immigrants commonly face a multitude of challenges as they initially adjust to life in a host country. Scholars of international migration have explored difficulties related to proficiency in the host country language (Alba et al., 2002), recognition of foreign credentials (Ozkan, 2018), obtaining a job that is commensurate with one's skill and education level (Chiswick & Miller, 2009), inefficient support networks (Menjívar, 2000) and racial discrimination (Waters, 1994), among others. What is the case, however, when the immigrant is of the same ethnic background as those in the host society? Do they adjust more easily because of their shared ethnic connection? Known as ethnic return migration, this type of move and integration process is unique as it refers to individuals who possess an ethnic affinity towards a homeland and who migrate to a country they have not been to for years, or even generations. Ethnic return migration is especially significant as it is a nation-building tool used by countries to attract ethnic brethren that can be used to define the boundaries of the nation (Skrentny et al., 2007). This type of migration is viewed as a return, presupposing that ethnic return migrants would not experience integration challenges encountered by traditional labour or family migrants.

The reality of return cases, however, does not live up to this expectation and frequently turns out to be a trying, if not outright negative, experience for the immigrants. They find that their shared ethnic connection is not enough to facilitate social integration, and that the native-born community view them not as ethnic kin, but as another immigrant group. Their challenges are compounded by state policies that hinder integration, such as an inability to achieve full citizenship, or being limited to certain fields of employment. As such, the ethnic return migration literature finds that these migrants end up developing a stronger affinity for their natal country, which oftentimes leads to a move back to their country of birth (Hedberg, 2009). The current landscape of the ethnic return literature, however, is incomplete because it emphasizes that these negative outcomes stem primarily from two sources: adverse state policies and negative reactions from the native-born community (Cook-Martín & Viladrich, 2009; Klekowski von Koppenfels, 2009; Levy, 2004; Seol & Skrentny, 2009).

In the event that the opposite scenario is true, in which there are welcoming and integrating state policies, in addition to positive engagement from the native-born community, we would expect ethnic return migrants to more seamlessly integrate and be a successful example of nation building. I use the case of American Jews migrating to Israel, specifically lone soldiers (those without immediate family in Israel), as an example of a group that receives ample opportunities for integration and are wholly welcomed by the native-born community. Employing a framework of "nationalism-as-practice" (Bonikowski, 2016; Fox & Miller-Idriss, 2008), I examine how connections to the nation and national identity are produced and reproduced by lone soldiers through their interactions with political institutions (the military) and social interactions with native-born Israelis. I find that lone soldiers undergo adverse homecoming experiences for two main reasons. First, welcoming state policies are not sufficient to balance the disillusionment lone soldiers feel about Israel's nation-building agenda. Through their engagement with other racial minorities and exposure to non-Jewish sites, they become disconnected from their original goal of settling permanently in the country and are more critical of Israel's politics. Secondly, despite being positively portrayed in Israeli media, lone soldiers become further disillusioned as they find it challenging to establish meaningful relationships with native-born Israelis. Even though Israelis remain generally receptive of lone soldiers, the lone soldiers reported challenges making connections due to their lack of an Israeli accent, cultural barriers between the two groups, and differing attitudes towards service in the army. Ultimately, I argue that the experiences of ethnic return migrants should be properly contextualized in the length of time it typically takes for immigrants to integrate. Moreover, I call for future scholarship to consider ethnic return migrants' relational social position when analysing their experiences in the homeland.

I first briefly outline the ethnic return literature and its role within the nation-building agenda. I demonstrate how our understanding of the phenomenon is limited by cases that draw from countries that exhibit negative state policies and adverse relationships with the native-born community. The following section highlights why the Israeli case stands out in current literature. I move to situating the case of the lone soldiers as an example of a group that

receives overwhelming governmental support and is publicly lionized in the country. After describing the method, I evaluate 52 in-depth interviews conducted with former lone soldiers, in which I include a discussion of the main findings and an argument for reframing the context in which we analyse the experiences of ethnic return migrants.

2 | THE ROLE OF THE STATE AND NATIVE-BORN COMMUNITY IN ETHNIC RETURN MIGRATION

Ethnic return migrants, defined as “later-generation descendants of diasporic peoples who “return” to their countries of ancestral origin” (Tsuda, 2009a: 1), are a unique group of migrants. Unlike traditional migrants, ethnic return migrants are bonded through their characteristic of being dispersed from a homeland due to ethnopolitical persecution or economic factors. Most commonly, ethnic return migrants are drawn back to the homeland because of economic pressures felt in the country of birth (Joppke & Rosenhek, 2009). They perceive that moving to the homeland will enable them to get better jobs, earn more money, and achieve a higher social status. These economic stressors are coupled with “ethnic ties and affinities [that] ultimately *channel* the migrant flow to the homeland” (Tsuda, 2009b: 21). This unique interplay between economic and ethnic factors makes the motivation for this type of migration unique from other types of labour migration flows and carries with it an assumption that such migration will progress more smoothly than is the case for labour migrants.

Ethnic return migrants are also notably different from traditional labour migrants in the nation-building role they play in the ancestral homeland. Unlike civic states, ethnic nations reach beyond their borders during the process of nation building in order to attract ethnic brethren living outside the homeland. Ethnic preference policy, therefore, is inherently a practice of nationhood (Skrentny et al., 2007). In deciding policies for coethnic nonnationals, ethnic nations define the boundaries of the nation. States who admit ethnic return migrants do so to either to fill a labour market need, or they feel a moral obligation to protect their overseas compatriots (Ibid). But regardless of rationale, states who admit ethnic return migrants tend to deny that immigration is even occurring, preferring instead to speak about the “return” of coethnics (Joppke, 2005: 22). In many ways, states perceive ethnic return migrants as an ideal member of the nation, since they help to further the goals of nation building and will presumably not encounter the same integration struggles as that of regular immigrants.

In reality, the idyllic goals of ethnic return migration commonly fall short of expectations for two main reasons. First, while the state views ethnic return migrants as critical to their nation-building agenda, this does not always translate into favourable policies and programs that promote their successful integration. For instance, South Korea provides more favourable visa opportunities and social benefits to Korean Americans than to ethnic Korean Chinese citizens (Seol & Skrentny, 2009). In Germany, ethnic Germans arriving from the former Soviet Union and Eastern and Central Europe receive reduced integration packages (as compared to other immigrants) and are required to complete language tests (Klekowski von Koppenfels, 2009). Secondly, the goal of the nation to recruit ethnic return migrants does not guarantee a positive reception from the native-born community. Individuals from the native-born community often ostracize ethnic return migrants because they are seen as inauthentic, as was the case of Moroccan-born Israelis returning to Morocco (Levy, 2004). In other cases, such as in Spain, Spanish-descent Argentines were viewed as having an improper work ethic because of their unwillingness to perform certain types of work (Cook-Martin & Viladrich, 2009). Overall, the challenges of feeling both socially and societally excluded in the ancestral homeland lead many to develop a stronger affinity for their country of birth (Hedberg, 2009) and is the reason many ethnic return migrants decide to reemigrate to their natal country (Thomas-Hope, 2002).

As it stands, the literature would lead us to expect that if the scenario for ethnic return migrants was reversed—in which there are favourable state policies and positive reception from the native-born community—then their movement to and integration into the homeland would be a successful example of ethnic return. The following section outlines the case of Israel, arguably the most prominent example of ethnic return migration, as a case in

which the state overwhelmingly promotes the movement and integration of its ethnic migrants, in addition to the native-born community, through public media, stating its support and acceptance of ethnic migrants.

3 | NATION BUILDING IN ISRAEL

Israel's ethnic return migration policy is unique in a number of respects. While the legal and moral framework encouraging Jews to return shares some similarities with other ethnic return cases (e.g., *Aussiedler* to Germany), the long expanse of history that elapsed since the Jews' first dispersal makes Israel's case of ethnic return more "virtual" than a return to a homeland following several generations of exile (Joppke & Rosenhek, 2002). In addition, Israel differs from other European and Asian cases of ethnic return, as those countries are no longer in the process of nation building and instead encourage their ethnic return migrants to return for ideological and/or economic purposes. While Israel's policy certainly contains an ideological component, Israel is especially unique as it is still in the process of nation building, particularly in the "context of insecure borders, contested territories, security threats, [and] demographic realities" (Remennick, 2009: 209). These conditions make it so that new immigrants, even though they are arriving over 70 years after the establishment of the state, are still integral to the country's nation-building agenda.

Further, nation building in Israel is rooted in the Zionist project, which is grounded in Judaism and the need to instil a common "Israeli-Jewish" identity. Through this inextricable connection with Judaism, the state underscores its identity as a nation that is inaccessible to outsiders. This exclusivism "is more zealously guarded and complete than that of a merely ethnic group" (Joppke, 2005: 165). Under this religious formulation, Israel explicitly frames its existence as being a natural right of every Jew. This is outwardly stated in the Law of Return, which in its first clause proclaims that all Jews have the right to come to Israel as an *oleh* (immigrant). This notion of encouraging the return of all Jews is especially unique among other ethnic return cases that typically have some sort of admission restriction, whether it is country of origin, length of stay, language capacity, or skill set.

Despite the all-encompassing language of the Law of Return, it should be noted that Jewish migration to Israel has not always been inclusive of all Jews. Dating back to the first waves of Zionist immigration in the late 19th century, settlers had to prove their financial capacity to sustain themselves without the aid of Zionist institutions (Shilo, 1994). In November 1951, following government debates and realization that the state's meagre resources were insufficient to take in vast numbers of immigrants, Israel began denying *aliyah* (translating to ascent, this term refers to the movement of Jews to Israel) to Jews if they were over 35 years old, in poor health, or if they were from a country in which Jews were not considered to be in danger (Picard, 2018). These restrictions were not purely fiscal in nature; they were also related to negative stereotypes towards Jewish immigration candidates from Muslim countries. And finally, non-European Jews arriving in the 1980s from Africa and Asia were more likely than European Jews to be geographically excluded as the central administration placed them in development towns away from urban centres. And finally, Ethiopian Jews were subject to, and continue to suffer from, institutional racism, higher rates of poverty, and lower achievement in the education system.

Despite periods of exclusion, Israel maintains its stance as the home for all Jews. As such, the state is intensely involved in ensuring new immigrants' access to a wide variety of opportunities and institutions. Immigrants receive settlement assistance during the first years of arrival, free housing for several months, subsidies upon purchasing a home, job training, employment services and tax exemptions (Rubin & Rubin, 2014). To ensure the success of its nation-building project, the state is embedded throughout each phase of the migration process as it controls both the composition of the state, and the successful incorporation of incoming Jewish immigrants.

Perhaps the most defining feature of Israel's nation-building project is compulsory military service in the Israel Defense Forces. With the exception of ultra-orthodox Jews and Palestinian citizens, all Israelis and new immigrants of a certain age (usually those who are 18–21 and unmarried) are required to complete military service. While military service is commonly cited as a nation-building mechanism (Krebs, 2004; Moskos, 1971), the case of Israel

stands out for two reasons. First, the Israeli military is considered one of the central organizing principles of society (Kimmerling, 1993). The military “represents the governing factor in the state; the armed forces penetrate all social and state networks, such as bureaucracy, economy, education and culture” (Ibid: 205). Otherwise known as “total militarism,” the IDF is not a tertiary security force but is an institution inherently embedded throughout Israeli society.

Secondly, military service is perceived as a state mechanism central to the creation of Israel's melting pot (Kachtan, 2012). Since its founding in 1948, IDF service has been seen as a way to give disadvantaged immigrant populations a role in Israeli society, and it was decided that the IDF had a “national” role to play in this matter (Azarya & Kimmerling, 1980). Its aim for immigrants is to reduce the ethnic gap, and as a product of that, consolidate all citizens into a single nation with shared national values (Drory, 2005). Military service is perceived as the fundamental expression of an individual's commitment to the state and as a measure of civic virtue (Sasson-Levy, 2003), the goal of which is to strengthen Jewish identity and enhance links to the land, values, heritage, and people. Particularly in the state of Israel, we would expect the integrating function of the military to be especially successful, as the ultimate form of nation building “comes in situations in which the citizenry have to band together against the other during times of conflict” (Wimmer, 2018: 160). In such a context, the military is not just a setting in which immigrants come into contact with the native-born population; it also serves to imbue a strong sense of national solidarity, the effects of which should ostensibly extend beyond military service.

4 | THE CASE OF LONE SOLDIERS

There is a particular group of immigrants in Israel—lone soldiers—that is especially lauded for their support of Israel and commitment to nation building. The term stems from an official government designation created in 1975 and refers to new immigrants or volunteers from abroad who do not have any immediate family in Israel, or native-born Israelis who are either orphans or individuals from broken homes (Lone Soldier Center 2015). For purposes of this research, I focus specifically on lone soldiers who are new immigrants. Moreover, these individuals are “soldiers” because they are of an age in which IDF service is required by law.

With their lone soldier designation, these individuals are entitled to a host of additional government benefits to help ease their time in the IDF. While they are in the army, they receive double the salary of regular soldiers, food stipends, rent and electricity bill subsidies, and an extra 30 days leave each year to visit their country of birth. These benefits are meant to help account for the lack of familial support networks in the country. Beyond the benefits, lone soldiers also receive ample institutional support. In June 2016, the Lobby for Lone Soldiers was established in the Knesset as a parliamentary caucus, and since the mid-2000s, a number of non-profit organizations were created to support lone soldiers during their service, including The Lone Soldier Center, Chayal el Chayal and Garin Tzabar. The government recognizes that this group, in its commitment to move to Israel without family and serve in the military, is a powerful symbol of nation building. As such, they attempt to provide any necessary assistance needed for their successful incorporation.

The integration pathway of lone soldiers is further eased due to their overwhelmingly positive portrayal by the public and media. By and large, lone soldiers are lauded for both their move and service to the State of Israel. There are countless profiles praising individual lone soldiers as exemplary citizens and shining examples of Israeli society (e.g., Ahronheim, 2017; Chasnoff, 2016; Rudoren, 2012). Since lone soldiers do not have family in Israel, individuals from the native-born community oftentimes participate in programs to “adopt” lone soldiers and assist in their integration. The connections with adopted families can become quite strong and stories show how adopted family have been known to grieve the passing of lone soldiers in the event they lose their lives in combat (Shpigel, 2017). Overall, lone soldiers are embraced publicly by the native-born community and are wholly welcomed and praised for their commitment to the country.

The number of lone soldiers serving in the Israeli military has been steadily rising in recent years, with over 7,000 soldiers currently on active duty (Lone Soldier Center 2020). About half of all lone soldiers are soldiers from abroad, and approximately 35% of these immigrants come from the United States (Ferber, 2015). Despite the integration opportunities offered by the government and positive reception from native-born Israelis, approximately half of lone soldiers leave Israel after completing their service. Of the half that stay, one-third end up leaving Israel shortly after (Ahronheim, 2016). Unlike other cases of ethnic return in which the nation-building agenda is hampered through negative interactions with state institutions or the native-born in the homeland, one would expect that lone soldiers would successfully integrate into Israeli society and be a potent symbol of nation building.

5 | DATA AND METHODS

To understand why the ethnic return of lone soldiers in Israel did not flourish as expected, I interviewed lone soldiers from the country of origin most represented in the lone soldier community—the United States. The number of Jews in the United States is currently estimated to be 6.97 million (Sheskin & Dashefsky, 2019), making American Jews the largest Jewish diaspora in the world (Dieckhoff, 2017). Historically, American Jews' connection to Israel was described using a “mobilization model,” (Cohen & Liebman, 2000) as American Jews engaged with the homeland primarily through centralized philanthropic efforts and unified political advocacy. More recently, Sasson (2014) argues that a new “direct engagement” model has emerged among American Jewry in their connection with Israel. Instead of connecting with Israel through formal organizations, American Jews are engaging more personally and directly with Israel by supporting diverse political causes and targeting their giving. This direct engagement also entails more visits to Israel, which has translated to consistent immigration rates from the United States to Israel. From 2014 to 2019, an average of 2,520 immigrants per year moved from the United States to Israel (Israel Central Bureau of Statistics, author's calculation).

The data is based on fifty-two interviews (35 male and 17 female) with US-born lone soldiers who have completed their service. Since lone soldiers have a high rate of migration back to the US, I divided my interviews evenly between respondents who have returned to the US since completing their service ($n = 26$), and those that have stayed in Israel ($n = 26$). Among the participants, 10 are the children of former Israelis. Participants were recruited via social media groups dedicated to lone soldiers and through a nonprofit organization that assists US-born individuals in moving to Israel. To qualify for the research, individuals were required to have made *aliyah* as part of their move, as this is an indication of a formal commitment to the country (as opposed to serving as volunteer soldiers).

With this research, I sought to understand the myriad ways in which individuals express their commitment to a country and its nationalist ideals. My approach is inspired by Bonikowski's (2016) call to understand how nationalism works as a “heterogeneous cultural domain consisting of tacit cognitive and affective dispositions, routinized forms of talk, and ritualized symbolic practices” (429). It is not enough to simply look at policies and understand an individual's ideology; interactions with the nation are manifest in “cultural narratives, political claims, symbolic representations, and cultural schemas” (431). Described by others as “nationalism-as-practice” (Brubaker, 2004; Fox & Miller-Idriss, 2008), this approach enables me to understand the ways in which people think, talk, and act through and with the nation. This entails both their interactions with official state institutions, but also their engagements with individuals in the native-born community.

Maintaining a semi-structured interview style, I asked individuals to reflect on their Jewish and/or Zionist upbringing, when and why they decided to move to Israel, what preparations they made in advance of their move, and any Hebrew skills they possessed before coming to Israel. Questions primarily centred on their experience in the IDF as a lone soldier, and their integration into Israel post-army. For individuals who stayed in Israel, the conversation was based on how life has been in Israel since their move and why they have chosen to stay. For individuals who came back to the US, I asked more about the factors that led to them returning back to their country of birth. Through my analysis I did not discern a substantive difference in interactions with the IDF and native-born among

those who stayed in Israel and those who left, therefore data from the two groups will be presented together and qualifiers are included, where appropriate. Moreover, I disclosed to my participants that I was Jewish, had been raised in a Jewish household, and had visited Israel on several occasions. These details gave me Jewish “authenticity,” which helped the participants to more easily discuss their experiences in Israel (Merton, 1972; Zavella, 1993). All interviews were transcribed and thematically and inductively analysed using NVivo software.

6 | LONE SOLDIERS' RATIONALE AND EXPECTATIONS FOR MOVING TO ISRAEL

The desire to move to Israel and become an Israeli citizen typically originated in childhood. Thirteen of the participants discussed attending Jewish day schools and summer camps growing up. These experiences—which included setting up donations for Israeli nonprofits, attending Israeli independence day and remembrance day gatherings, taking courses on Israeli history, among others—can be effective in simulating the Israeli nation from abroad and instituting a sense of belonging (Lainer-Vos, 2014). Jonah said that in his Zionist high school he was taught he belonged “to something else, a group of Jewish people around the world. We always used to speak of Israel very, very highly, and somehow I guess throughout the years I started to feel that I was more Israeli than American ... I wanted to figure out what it means to live in an Israeli country.” The Zionist programming and Jewish identity-building embedded in Jewish day schools and summer camps had the effect of creating a curiosity within individuals, which they sought to explore further by moving to Israel.

Their Israeli education was further cultivated at home. Eighteen participants described the effects of being raised in a Zionist household. Growing up in a small town, Nathan said that his parents “drilled” into him that “Jews are guests in other countries and we’re in exile and that Israel is the ultimate homeland.” Familial influences typically occurred alongside family, volunteer, or university trips to Israel. Avi recounted his study abroad experience in a small agricultural community in the Golan Heights. As there were few English speakers, he felt he got to experience Israel as a “real Israeli.” He adds, “I really began to connect and find that connection with Israel and see that piece that I didn’t have previously in America that really began to attract me.” Growing up in a Jewish environment and getting snapshots of Israeli life through early exposure enhanced their connection to Israel and ignited a desire to experience the country as an Israeli citizen.

Their rationale, however, extended beyond individual motivations, and was also framed in their desire to be directly part of Israel’s nation-building process. Akiva described it as a sort of Jewish guilt. He said, “It seemed to me that I needed to come here as fast as possible to become part of something historic that was happening. It seemed to me selfish to stay in America.” Individuals reflected on their belief that Israel as a nation was still in a nascent stage and they were obligated as Jews in the diaspora to move to the country, actively contribute, and be part of the nation-building process.

Moving to Israel was not just about learning and experiencing Israel as a young adult; it also entailed going through the same experience and shouldering the same responsibility as other Israelis of the same age, notably service in the IDF. Lone soldiers understood their Jewish upbringing would only take them so far and that certain active steps upon arrival were necessary in order to facilitate their “Israelification.” Molly said,

In many cases I feel like it’s the army that makes the Israeli, and not where you were born. It’s this collective, combined experience that the majority of the country goes through, and it’s that experience that makes you an Israeli person.

The interviewees innately associated immigrating to Israel with service in the IDF. They felt their integration would not be complete without military service. Indeed, it is their service that many lone soldiers felt earned them their right to live in Israel.

What did lone soldiers expect from their IDF service? Almost all of the participants mentioned they expected their IDF service to be physically demanding. For Joanne, she was okay with enduring the physical stress because “I felt it was really important, so it kind of didn't matter how hard it would be.” Lone soldiers also expected that serving in the IDF would be an opportunity to finally connect with the brethren they had learned about in school and from their families. They anticipated encountering individuals who shared similar ideologies and attitudes towards the state and military service. Gideon hoped his fellow servicemen, like him, would be “gung-ho Zionist, idealistic Jewish Rambos.” In essence, participants expected there to be no cultural gap between themselves and the Israelis they were serving alongside. Even though they were born and raised in separate countries, lone soldiers anticipated having a shared cultural and ideological connection with their native-born Israeli counterparts.

Finally, lone soldiers expected their IDF service to be an opportunity for them to be of service to the state. They viewed their service as a way of contributing to a goal outside themselves. Jordan said he thought to himself, “I'm here to donate my service. Myself. To contribute. To volunteer.” Emily said that above all else, she was most excited “about giving something to Israel.” It was not that they were simply fulfilling their requirement of IDF service as part of becoming a new citizen; they wanted to play their part and viewed their IDF service as a way for them to make an active contribution to the safety and security of their ancestral homeland.

7 | SUMMARY OF RESULTS

When lone soldiers move to Israel, the context shaping their return is one in which we would expect these individuals to experience a smooth integration and be a successful example of nation building. They are welcomed through state policies that guide their move and acculturation, as well as public support from the general community and media (Table 1). However, the presence of formal state support is not enough to overcome the disillusionment lone soldiers experience through IDF service, causing them to question their role in the nation-building process. That disillusionment continues when lone soldiers are unable to develop meaningful in-person connections with Israelis, as they experience differences with respect to their lack of an Israeli accent, cultural differences manifested in behavioural patterns, and different perspectives on serving in the IDF.

8 | MILITARY SERVICE AND MISMATCHED EXPECTATIONS

As a state policy, service in the IDF does not always achieve its stated aim of helping lone soldiers integrate and feel like they are part of the Zionist mission espoused by the military. Instead, lone soldiers find that this exposure to the country's politics through obligatory military service makes them question the undying commitment they felt towards Israel before their arrival. This is due to them being exposed to different kinds of individuals and places that provide a layered perspective to their understanding of the country's political situation. Lone soldiers also feel unease and guilt in their position of privilege as compared to other groups in Israel. As a result, they develop a

TABLE 1 Contextual factors and their impacts

	Welcoming aspects	Outcomes
State policies	Significant financial and practical support from IDF	Disillusionment and exposure to political reality
Engagement with native-born community	Positive portrayal of lone soldiers in media and general welcoming attitude among Israelis	Disconnect between lone soldiers and Israelis due to differences in accents, cultural behaviours, and motivations to serve

conflicting perspective that is distinct both from the image of Israel they had growing up and the one the state and its corresponding policies seeks to imbue.

Growing up in a Zionist environment, lone soldiers were typically surrounded by those who shared a similar vision of Israel. As such, they expected to encounter a homogenous state in which the population shared these same views. This was further confirmed by how the state frames obligatory service in the IDF as a state policy intended, in part, to help new immigrants connect with Israelis. In many ways, the army does provide lone soldiers with a sense of family and community. Joel described those in his unit as an “immediate support group” that he could draw upon. Where lone soldiers felt conflicted was in their encounters with different ethnic groups who held varying opinions and perspectives on the politics of the state. Eitan described being exposed to individuals outside of the “Jewish bubble.” He said that it changed his identity because it called into question many of the viewpoints he had taken for granted when it came to the Israeli-Arab conflict. He elaborated further,

Before college I had this one-dimensional perspective—that I had to always stand for Israel, always defend Israel. Israel's always right, you know, homeland of the Jews, and you have to protect it from a military, financial, mental standpoint. And then being exposed to these different ideas, people, and cultures ... it allowed for questioning to enter my mind where I do not think it was something I valued before.

Kayla expressed similar emotions as she reflected on meeting with Palestinians and hearing about their day-to-day experiences in East Jerusalem, the West Bank, and Gaza. These exchanges made her feel an “uneasiness about the political situation” as it stood in stark contrast to the unified ideal of Israel she had previously imagined. Moreover, Kayla said, “I felt a bit of guilt over the privileges I was awarded automatically as a new Israeli immigrant, which were foreign to Palestinians in the military-controlled West Bank.” It was through their military service that individuals encountered different perspectives on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and inequalities embedded in the system that called into question their undying commitment to being part of Israel's nation-building agenda.

Their army service also took them to different locations within Israel, in which they gained understanding, and further discontent, about Israel's state of political affairs. In earlier trips to Israel, lone soldiers had typically only visited sites with a majority Jewish population. As such, their perspective on the homeland was curated to portray a pro-Zionist perspective on the conflict. But after being stationed in areas such as the West Bank and Gaza, interviewees such as Elliott said, “I think when you're actually there compared to what you hear about it, it's a very, very different scenario. It gave me a different view of the whole Israeli-Palestinian conflict.” Brandon said, “I did not feel like I was protecting Jews there. I felt like I was protecting a system, sometimes of oppression.” Lone soldiers began to view the situation in Israel through a more critical perspective and felt unease with their role. The nation-building agenda they had in mind stood in stark contrast to the practise of nation building they were tasked with on the ground.

After their IDF service, lone soldiers felt disillusioned with the politics of Israel and their idealization of Israel began to wane. Shimon said, “I didn't feel like I was protecting Israel. I felt more like I was protecting this settler movement, which I didn't fully understand enough beforehand to make a decision about it.” He ended up staying in Israel after his service and said that “Ultimately, the real foundations of my decision to move to Israel weren't really undermined. I still believe that I'm happy Israel exists ... I think it's a positive struggle for development. I'm glad that I served in the military.” Shimon's relationship with Israel evolved and become multifaceted. His view of the state aligns with Bonikowski's (2016) call to understand the nation as a “site of active political contestation between cultural communities with strikingly different belief systems” (428). It was through their direct interaction with the state during their military service that they no longer romanticized the country and felt they better understood Israel, in all of its complexities.

9 | SPEAKING HEBREW, BUT LACKING THE ACCENT

Just as the purpose of military service was intended to help lone soldiers foster an Israeli identity and connection to the state, so too lone soldiers expected that their interactions with Israelis, particularly when done in Hebrew, would solidify their bond with a group they considered to be their brethren. A shared language, in particular, is a critical form of nation building (Anderson, 2006), and speaking a common language is particularly important in Israel where proficiency in Hebrew is seen as a critical step towards integration (Remennick, 2003). The Hebrew language holds a hegemonic status in the country because part of the Zionist endeavour was a linguistic revolution that involved the revival of Hebrew as a spoken language (Tannenbaum, 2009). Speaking Hebrew provides more than communication benefits; it is through everyday talk and interaction during which attitudes towards the nation can be made “momentarily salient” (Fox & Miller-Idriss, 2008: 542). Lone soldiers understood that obtaining a proper handle of Hebrew would be necessary in cultivating relationships with Israelis and ultimately, strengthening their bond with the nation.

Upon arrival, however, they quickly learned that competence in Hebrew was insufficient. They discovered that their lack of an Israeli accent meant they had to constantly negotiate which particular identity—American or Israeli—they ascribed to in social environments (or in some cases, was ascribed to them). One particular strategy adopted by lone soldiers was concealment. They wanted to be viewed just like any other Israeli and consciously attempted to hide their American accent. Jason’s solution was to stay quiet during the first month of basic training. He said,

There were people in my unit that did not know I was American because I did not open my mouth. The only way that I could cope was to wait that half a second to see what everyone else did and follow suit, and if everyone ran right then I ran right.

For others, like Richard, there was a sense of achievement when individuals were unable to recognize his accent, which allowed him to feel part of the Israeli collective. He elaborates,

There were certain mundane things that Israelis might take for granted but that made me very proud. For instance, being in a combat situation, you have a *keshet*, a walkie-talkie, and you are responsible for carrying it and communicating through it. For an Israeli, that’s no big deal. For someone who did not grow up speaking the language and the fact that they did not know I wasn’t from here, it was a source of pride.

This strategy of concealing one’s accent in order to feel more connected with Israelis was not always effective. There were moments in which lone soldiers felt they could not “keep up the act.” Eitan described a shift when individuals realized he was American. He said his accent was, “something that Israelis like[d] to poke fun at, and for me, it was still a sore point even though I developed tougher skin.” For Ahuva, who served as a medic in the IDF, she described how difficult it was to maintain the accent during crises. She said, “I couldn’t function during the emergency in Hebrew, which [Israelis] thought was kind of funny, but I was embarrassed because people noticed I was different.”

These non-discursive forms of expression, such a smirk or chuckle, demonstrate how nationhood is made salient in everyday engagements (Fox & Miller-Idriss, 2008). These micro-level interactions, however, aggregate along with lone soldiers’ other experiences and colour how they perceive the nation and their role in it. Lone soldiers arrived in Israel with the expectation that fluency in Hebrew would foster bonds with fellow Israelis. They quickly learned that lacking an accent guided their daily interactions in such a way that inhibited their acculturation and development of an Israeli identity. Whether they overcame the accent hurdle, or hid their American accents, lone soldiers found themselves continuously negotiating their identity through these interactions, providing yet another obstacle to becoming part of the Israeli collective.

10 | ESTABLISHING CULTURAL DIFFERENCES THROUGH BEHAVIOUR

As described earlier, lone soldiers arrived in Israel with the expectation that they would naturally bond with Israelis. What they did not expect, however, was that they would be drawing clear cultural distinctions between themselves and Israelis. While Israelis were never overtly hostile to lone soldiers, the interviewees described Israelis' mannerisms as blunt and harsh, which they distinguished from the "politeness" of Americans. These attitudinal qualities, and the emotions associated with them, demonstrate how individuals "perform the nation" in everyday behaviours (Fox & Miller-Idriss, 2008). Molly discussed how she feels Israeli for the most part, but there were certain mannerisms she did not wish to implement. She said, "I think it's important to be nice, and care, and be respectful of other people." She completed her army service and is currently pursuing her bachelor's degree. She elaborated, "Sometimes I have a very hard time, like in class for example, teachers ask students over and over and over again to stop talking. And it's so disrespectful, and there are times where I do *feel* American because I'm disgusted by that kind of behaviour." Lone soldiers assigned a particular cultural quality to the Israelis they met that in turn shaped their views about the state. This "nationalism-as-practice" demonstrates how individuals define their relationship to the nation in ways that goes beyond official policies and interactions with state institutions.

Upon recognizing this characteristic, lone soldiers opted for two main strategies they used to manage these behavioural differences in their daily lives. First, some lone soldiers chose to distance themselves from Israelis and remain within their American social networks. They espoused the importance of passing down certain "American" traits to their future children in Israel. Jennifer elaborated on this point.

I still have a lot of that American politeness ... It's something that I will hopefully be giving over to my future children because I think there is something to that American politeness and the "customer is always right" attitude. Because in Israel, you'll see that the customer is not always right. All the bureaucracy and speaking to people on the phone ... it's very difficult. They do not have that same mentality. It's something I do appreciate about growing up in America, and I like to surround myself with people that seem that way.

For some, they felt like their challenging interactions with Israelis in the IDF prepared them for the bureaucracy they would encounter in Israel post-service. Julie said it was because of these tough interactions that she understands "why things don't work in Israel" and it helped her to feel more prepared for post-service life. For most interviewees, however, these types of daily interactions, and particularly their embeddedness within the culture, had the effect of making lone soldiers feel they did not belong and that they needed to distance themselves. Lone soldiers would create private spaces, in which they kept certain aspects of their American identity and mannerisms intact. However, resorting to this coping mechanism left them feeling disillusioned and distanced from a group they naturally expected to connect with.

While some lone soldiers created separate and distinct spaces, others decided to actively "perform the nation" and strategically employed this Israeli forwardness. This was seen as a necessary concession to making a home in Israel. Take Yael, who spoke about the need to act in a more brazen manner in certain social settings. "If you really want something, you have to fight for everything. Be the loudest person in line. Push to the front of the line. You can't be shy. If you're shy you're going to be miserable." Despite this strategy, lone soldiers acknowledged that this tactic was not a reflection of their true beliefs but was simply required as part of life in Israel. Sharon summarized this point.

What I realize is that to a certain extent it's good to become Israeli, but I do not want to change who I am. I do not want to not be that person anymore just because I'm living in a new place.

Lone soldiers would draw this distinct line between the behavioural attributes of Americans and Israelis, but also understand that part of living in Israel means strategically applying this behaviour in order to fit in.

Regardless of tactic, lone soldiers came to realize that developing connections with Israelis was not going to be as fluid of a process as they had expected. The tactics they employed are similar to that of other minorities in Israel, namely Palestinians, who also resort to their social networks and compliance with dominant norms as a de-stigmatization strategy (Mizrachi & Herzog, 2012). The difference with lone soldiers is they are a group that was expected to seamlessly connect with other Israelis, but in reality, they face similar hurdles to connecting with the native-born majority. While not outright aggression, having to encounter these daily instances of impoliteness had a cumulative othering effect on lone soldiers and served to further diminish the irrefutable attachment they once had for Israel.

11 | CONFLICTING ATTITUDES TOWARDS SERVICE IN THE IDF

Unlike other cases of ethnic return in which individuals are confined to marginalized areas of society and/or employment through state policies (Song, 2009), lone soldiers experienced close and direct contact with native-born Israelis as they went through the same rite of passage in the IDF. Contrary to the IDF's expected purpose of uniting immigrants with native-born Israelis, lone soldiers found there to be a significant divide between their motivations to serve as compared to that of Israelis. Lone soldiers arrived eager to both live in Israel and contribute to the safety and security of the country. This form of nationalism-as-practice meant lone soldiers were actively "choosing the nation" (Fox & Miller-Idriss, 2008) in the hopes of establishing connections with other Israelis and being part of the nation-building project. Many stressed in their interviews how they purposely volunteered to move to Israel at a young enough age when they knew army service would still be required, and they were eager to serve alongside native-born Israelis who they assumed shared similar motivations. Instead, they felt dismissed because of their wholehearted aspiration to contribute to the country as compared to native-born Israelis' blasé, and sometimes acrimonious, attitude towards serving in the IDF.

Lone soldiers were surprised to find Israeli service members expressing a general lack of enthusiasm towards service. They heard stories about individuals trying to avoid service, complaining about particular assignments, and questioning their assigned role. Ezra states,

Some of their attitudes were not the greatest. A lot of "Why am I here? Why do I have to do this? I do not want to do this." You know, they felt like service was forced upon them, rather than them wanting to be there. I did not affiliate with that mentality.

In response to seeing other unit members crying that they wanted to go home, Naomi would think to herself, "I actually want to be here. How can you cry? This is such a privilege, and such a big honour just to be here." On a fundamental level, lone soldiers expected that regardless of other integration challenges they may face, native-born Israelis would "choose the nation" like they did and share a similar passion for service. When confronted with reality, this disconnect created an unexpected fissure between the two groups.

Compounding this experience were the questions they encountered from native-born Israelis as to why they would choose to move to Israel and serve in the army. Israelis did not understand why lone soldiers would come to Israel when they could instead be in college and enjoying what they perceived to be the typical American college experience. As Gideon said,

They were just surprised because, as an American, they see my life as American Pie (the movie). We finish high school and go to college and just sort of party ... That's how they perceive me and they are

just confused as to why I would give up that type of lifestyle and join the lifestyle of an Israeli, which is hard ... I had to constantly explain myself.

The fact that lone soldiers had to regularly justify their decision to move to Israel and serve in the IDF had many reexamining the very basis of their move. They anticipated that their Israeli counterparts would “choose the nation” (Fox & Miller-Idriss, 2008) like they did and possess a shared desire to contribute to the nation's development and security. However, by having their intentions questioned and not sharing the same basic desire towards service created further disillusionment between their nation-building ideals and the lack of similar motivation among Israelis. These experiences created an atmosphere in which lone soldiers felt they could not establish genuine connections with Israelis, further depressing their homecoming experience.

12 | CONCLUSION

In this paper, I demonstrate that the adverse experiences of ethnic return migrants do not always stem from exclusionary state policies and negative interactions with the native-born community. Drawing upon a seemingly ideal case in which there are distinct governmental advantages afforded to ethnic return migrants, in addition to public acceptance from the media and native-born community, I show how lone soldiers are left disillusioned and frustrated both in their interactions with the state and native-born Israelis. Through their obligatory service in the IDF, an institution meant to facilitate social cohesion, they encounter a variety of people and places that conflict with their original nation-building ideals. And instead of forming natural bonds with Israelis, they feel marginalized because they do not have the proper accent, do not possess the same cultural traits, and differ in their attitudes towards service. Even though the context is primed for acceptance and a successful transition to Israeli life, lone soldiers leave the IDF disillusioned and questioning the undying commitment they have to Israel.

By using a “nationalism-as-practice” framework, this research also shows the myriad ways individuals interact with the nation. By being stationed in sites with non-Jewish majorities, they came to learn that the cultural narrative they were raised on was significantly more complex in practice, leading them to feel disillusioned with the purpose of their service. In their interactions with native-born Israelis, they realized how individuals can perform and articulate their relationship with the nation through attitudes towards service, accents, and behavioural qualities. By being in close contact with their peers in the IDF, lone soldiers created these distinctions between themselves and Israelis – which they extrapolated to their feelings about the state – that left them feeling further disillusioned and distanced from their original purpose of settling permanently in Israel.

The experiences of lone soldiers are instructive for the ethnic return migration, and general migration scholarship, in two respects. The first has to do with the length of time ethnic return migrants spend in the homeland before formulating opinions and attitudes about the homeland and, subsequently, their decision to stay. There is an expectation among ethnic return migrants that they will quickly adjust and acclimate within a few short years to life in the homeland. This expectation was shared among lone soldiers as well. However, the challenges faced by lone soldiers with respect to political attitudes, accents, and host community engagement are all facets of integration that take many years, if not generations, to achieve. According to immigrant integration scholars, full political, cultural, social, and economic integration typically takes around three generations (Waters & Pineau, 2015). Therefore, what we can take away from this case is the need to properly contextualize ethnic return migrants' experiences in the grand scheme of how long integration typically transpires. The lone soldiers' case is a call for future ethnic return migration scholarship to take a more wide-angled perspective on analyses of ethnic return migrants' experiences. Meaning, in order to understand the full scope of ethnic return migrants' experiences, future research should utilize a longitudinal and/or multi-generational perspective. Moreover, countries that accept such migrants can acknowledge the realistic timeline of adjustment and customize programs to accommodate the short-, medium-, and long-term needs of ethnic return migrants.

Secondly, the four main findings in this paper call into question the pre-existing dyadic frame of reference currently used throughout the ethnic return migration scholarship. At present, the scholarship is framed such that ethnic return migrants are at one pole and they strive to become fully integrated into the homeland, both with respect to the state and the native-born community. However, the findings in this paper demonstrate that instead of becoming one with the Israeli collective, lone soldiers ultimately analyse their experiences and develop incorporation strategies from the vantage point of their relational social position (Yazdiha, 2021). Despite sharing the same ethnic background, lone soldiers consider their “social identity and its social location relative to other groups as well as their perceptions of political-cultural contexts” (Ibid: 306). As such, they develop a unique, more nuanced relationship with the state and the community which deviates from their original strategy of full incorporation.

Looking back on their service, lone soldiers analysed their experiences from the vantage point of having grown up in the US and being taught a particular narrative about Israel. Being on the ground and serving in the IDF made it so that lone soldiers developed their own multifaceted perspective of the state, which veered from the romantic notion of Israel they were taught in their youth. In their interactions with Israelis, lone soldiers expected to share similar motivations, speaking habits, and behaviours with their Israeli peers, again, because of their vantage point of having been raised to believe that these were their brethren. When their expectations did not align with reality, it led individuals to develop divergent strategies for inclusion or boundary-making, and ultimately, disillusion for most participants.

Using this case as an example, I propose that future literature should take into consideration ethnic return migrants' relational social position when analysing the homecoming experience. Instead of viewing ethnic return migrants as a group that becomes immediately and unproblematically subsumed into the majority (even if there are policies in place to facilitate a smooth inclusion), we would better understand their experiences by adopting a subject-centred approach that takes into consideration migrants' pre-arrival backgrounds and perspectives, the political-cultural context, and their subsequent divergent strategies for engaging with the state and native-born community. By doing so, future scholars can go beyond analyses of formal integration policies and overt exclusionary practices on the part of the native-born community to more deeply examine ethnic return migrants' subjective experiences and their strategies for engaging with the state and native-born community.

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