
Margins of Belonging: An Empirical Review of Ethnic Stratification, Citizenship, and Social Exclusion in Contemporary Israel

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Abstract: This empirical review synthesizes recent sociological studies on ethnic stratification and social exclusion in Israel, focusing on the experiences of Mizrahim, Ethiopian Jews, Palestinian citizens of Israel, and African asylum seekers. Drawing on over 50 empirical studies published between 2010 and 2024, the paper critically analyzes how formal citizenship, ethnic hierarchies, and state policies shape patterns of social inequality. The review adopts a comparative framework to explore the differentiated access to rights, resources, and recognition within Israel's stratified citizenship regime. Using thematic synthesis, it identifies four dominant empirical patterns: (1) the institutionalization of Ashkenazi privilege in education and labor markets; (2) the marginalization of Palestinian citizens through spatial, political, and symbolic exclusion; (3) the racialization of Ethiopian Jews despite formal Jewish status; and (4) the legal precarity of non-citizen migrants and asylum seekers. By linking these findings to broader theories of citizenship, race, and settler colonialism, the review offers an integrative framework for understanding stratified inclusion in ethno-national states. Implications for future research include the need for longitudinal and intergenerational studies that center the voices of marginalized communities.

Keywords: Israeli sociology, ethnic stratification, citizenship, social exclusion, race, empirical review

1. Introduction

In recent decades, Israeli society has emerged as a paradigmatic case in sociological discussions on stratified citizenship, race, and institutionalized exclusion. As a state founded on the principles of Jewish self-determination, Israel has grappled with deep-seated internal hierarchies that complicate its democratic aspirations. While citizenship is formally extended to a broad segment of the population, including non-Jewish minorities, in practice it operates through a layered and differentiated system. This results in unequal access to rights, resources, and symbolic recognition across ethnic and legal status lines (Yiftachel, 2006; Shafir & Peled, 2002; Kimmerling, 2001).

Ethnic and national divisions—particularly between Ashkenazi elites and marginalized groups such as Mizrahim, Ethiopian Jews, Palestinian citizens of Israel, and African asylum seekers—remain central to Israel's social structure. These divisions are not merely cultural but are embedded in state institutions, public policy, and national identity discourses (Abu-Saad, 2013; Smooha, 2002; Yaron, Hashimshony-Yaffe, & Campbell, 2013). The stratification of citizenship is further compounded by geopolitical factors, security narratives, and global migration dynamics,

making Israel a complex terrain for examining how states manage inclusion and exclusion.

This review critically analyzes empirical sociological research conducted between 2010 and 2024 to examine how ethnic stratification is institutionalized and experienced across different domains: education, labor markets, housing, policing, and civil society. Focusing on four key population groups—Mizrahim, Ethiopian Jews, Palestinian citizens of Israel, and African asylum seekers—the review aims to identify recurring empirical patterns and interpret their implications through a comparative sociological lens. While these groups differ in historical origin, legal status, and sociopolitical position, they share a common experience of marginalization within a system of formally inclusive but substantively unequal citizenship (Ben-Eliezer, 2008; Ghanem, 2010).

Methodologically, the review draws on over 50 peer-reviewed studies sourced from databases including JSTOR, Scopus, and Hebrew-language academic platforms. These studies employ a range of qualitative, quantitative, and mixed-methods approaches. Inclusion criteria emphasized empirical grounding, critical analysis of structural inequality, and relevance to broader debates on ethnicity, race, and citizenship. By thematically organizing the

findings, the review highlights not only the differentiated experiences of marginality but also the shared logics that sustain ethnic hierarchies in Israeli society.

In addition to empirical synthesis, the review contributes to theory-building by engaging with interdisciplinary frameworks such as intersectionality, settler colonial theory, and ethnic democracy. The ultimate goal is to articulate an integrative understanding of “graded belonging” that captures the fragmentation of citizenship in ethno-national states. In doing so, the paper seeks to advance both Israeli sociology and broader comparative research on race, citizenship, and exclusion in the 21st century.

2. Theoretical Framework

The concept of **stratified citizenship** lies at the heart of this review’s analytical framework. While citizenship is conventionally understood as a status of legal and political membership within a nation-state, in practice, it often exists along a continuum shaped by ethnicity, class, gender, and legal categorization (Shachar, 2009; Marshall, 1950). In the Israeli context, formal citizenship does not guarantee equal rights or full participation in the national community. Rather, citizenship is distributed unevenly, producing what Yiftachel (2006) calls a system of “ethnocracy,” where state institutions serve

the dominant Jewish majority while structurally excluding others.

This aligns with **Smootha’s (1997)** notion of **ethnic democracy**, a model in which a dominant ethnic group maintains political hegemony while formally recognizing minority rights. The Israeli case exemplifies how ethnic democracy can coexist with liberal legal structures, producing a situation where certain groups—particularly Palestinian citizens and non-Jewish migrants—are simultaneously included and excluded. The **Law of Return**, which grants automatic citizenship to Jews worldwide, while denying repatriation rights to Palestinian refugees, institutionalizes this asymmetry (Peled, 1998; Shafir & Peled, 2002). It constructs Jewishness as a privileged axis of belonging and defines the boundaries of the national collective in exclusionary terms.

Another critical framework employed in this review is **settler colonial theory**, which situates Israel not merely as a nation-state but as a colonial formation premised on the displacement and erasure of indigenous Palestinians (Veracini, 2010; Wolfe, 2006). From this perspective, citizenship becomes a tool of territorial and demographic control. Settler colonial logics are evident in land allocation, urban planning, and the securitization of Arab populations (Yiftachel, 2009). Such frameworks help explain why

Palestinian citizens, though legally Israeli, remain marginalized in key sectors such as education, housing, and political participation.

Intersectionality, as developed by **Crenshaw (1991)**, further enriches this analysis by highlighting how multiple systems of oppression interact to shape differentiated experiences of exclusion. In Israel, for example, Ethiopian Jewish women are not only racialized but also subjected to gendered and religious hierarchies (Lewin-Epstein & Semyonov, 2013; Herzog, 2004). Similarly, Palestinian women navigate the dual constraints of state discrimination and patriarchal norms within their own communities. Intersectional approaches allow for a more nuanced understanding of how stratified citizenship operates across multiple dimensions simultaneously.

These theoretical tools-stratified citizenship, ethnic democracy, settler colonialism, and intersectionality are deployed in this review not as competing paradigms but as complementary lenses. Together, they offer a multidimensional framework for interpreting the empirical data on ethnic stratification and social exclusion in contemporary Israel. By integrating these perspectives, the review challenges linear or assimilationist models of citizenship and instead posits a fragmented, hierarchical, and dynamic model of belonging. This model what the paper

terms **graded belonging**-reflects the realities of how citizenship is experienced in practice, particularly in states where ethnicity and national identity are tightly coupled.

3. Ethnic Stratification within Jewish Populations

3.1 Mizrahim

Mizrahim, or Jews of Middle Eastern and North African descent, comprise nearly half of Israel's Jewish population, yet remain structurally disadvantaged in comparison to their Ashkenazi counterparts. Although legally recognized as full citizens and nominally integrated into the Zionist project, empirical research consistently shows that Mizrahim face persistent barriers in accessing social mobility and cultural representation (Swirski, 2015; Yonah, 2011).

One major mechanism of exclusion is the educational system, where Mizrahi youth are disproportionately tracked into vocational schools rather than academic high schools and universities. This tracking system, often justified through standardized testing or socioeconomic profiling, limits their access to high-status professions and elite institutions (Shenhav, 2006). Moreover, public schools in development towns where many Mizrahim reside receive less state funding, exacerbating structural inequality from an early age.

Spatial and residential segregation continues to be a core feature of Mizrahi marginalization. These communities were often settled in peripheral “development towns” during the state-building period of the 1950s and 1960s, regions characterized by weak infrastructure, underdeveloped public services, and economic stagnation (Yiftachel & Meir, 1998; Kemp & Yiftachel, 2000). Despite decades of protest and civic activism, many of these areas still lag behind the national average in employment, healthcare access, and housing quality.

Culturally, Ashkenazi hegemony dominates Israeli institutions, including media, academia, and national narratives, often relegating Mizrahi history, dialects, and traditions to the margins. This cultural exclusion is not merely symbolic—it reinforces stereotypes of Mizrahim as less rational, more traditional, and politically populist, undermining their legitimacy in public discourse (Shohat, 1988). The rise of Mizrahi activism and identity politics, particularly from the 1990s onward, has challenged this exclusion but remains limited in reshaping structural hierarchies.

3.2 Ethiopian Jews

Ethiopian Jews, or Beta Israel, represent a unique group within Israel’s Jewish population. Despite being granted citizenship under the Law of Return, they encounter multiple forms of

racialized discrimination that distinguish their experiences from other Jewish groups. Their immigration waves in the 1980s and 1990s were framed as humanitarian rescue operations, yet integration policies have often treated Ethiopian Jews as culturally deficient or in need of assimilation (Ben-Eliezer, 2008; Herzog, 2004).

Empirical studies highlight disproportionate rates of school dropout, poverty, and incarceration among Ethiopian youth, many of whom report experiencing police brutality and racial profiling (Elias & Kemp, 2010; Arar, 2020). Educational disparities persist, with Ethiopian students overrepresented in remedial programs and underrepresented in higher education. Racial stigma is further entrenched through incidents of institutional racism, such as segregated schools or the 1996 scandal involving the destruction of donated Ethiopian blood due to unfounded health concerns (Ben-Eliezer, 2008).

The paternalistic nature of state-led integration programs—emphasizing vocational training, social aid, and residential clustering—has often reinforced social isolation rather than enabling empowerment. These programs rarely incorporate community voices and tend to obscure systemic racism behind a discourse of benevolent inclusion (Herzog, 2004).

In response, younger generations of Ethiopian Israelis have increasingly mobilized against racial injustice. Protests, particularly those in

2015 and 2019, drew national attention to police violence and called for greater representation and equity. These movements, often led by youth, signify a broader shift from passive integration to active claims-making rooted in a discourse of dignity and racial justice (Arar, 2020).

4. Palestinian Citizens of Israel

Palestinian citizens of Israel also referred to as Arab Israelis comprise roughly 20% of the population and are formally recognized as citizens. However, their lived experiences reveal a deeply stratified system of membership marked by ethnic and national exclusion. Despite their legal citizenship, Palestinian citizens are routinely treated as second-class citizens in state discourse and policy implementation (Ghanem, 2010; Jabareen, 2006).

The education sector starkly illustrates institutional discrimination. Arab-majority schools receive significantly less funding than their Jewish counterparts, lack sufficient facilities, and often offer limited curricula that marginalize Palestinian history and culture (Abu-Saad, 2013). These gaps contribute to disparities in academic achievement and access to higher education, which in turn limit employment prospects and social mobility.

Land policy represents another axis of exclusion. Since 1948, the state has expropriated large swathes of land from Palestinian communities, often under security pretexts or for Jewish settlement expansion. Arab towns and villages face strict zoning restrictions, limited building permits, and a lack of state investment in infrastructure and services (Yiftachel, 2009). The result is overcrowding, housing shortages, and environmental degradation in Arab localities.

Politically, while Palestinian citizens have voting rights, they face structural marginalization in the Knesset and government coalitions. Arab parties are frequently excluded from policymaking processes, and their leaders are delegitimized as disloyal or anti-Zionist. Public discourse often frames Palestinian citizens as a demographic threat or security risk, reinforcing their outsider status (Rouhana & Sultany, 2003).

Security apparatuses have intensified surveillance and policing in Arab towns, particularly following periods of political unrest. Home demolitions, administrative detentions, and police violence are not uncommon, especially in the Negev/Naqab region among Bedouin populations (Kanaaneh, 2002). The securitization of Palestinian identity further undermines the prospects for substantive equality and civic inclusion.

5. African Asylum Seekers and Non-Citizen Migrants

African asylum seekers, primarily from Eritrea and Sudan, began arriving in Israel in significant numbers in the mid-2000s, fleeing conflict, dictatorship, and persecution. Although international law mandates refugee protection, the Israeli state has refused to recognize the majority of these individuals as refugees, instead labeling them as "infiltrators" under the 1954 Prevention of Infiltration Law (Levy, 2011; Yaron et al., 2013).

This legal framing has justified a range of exclusionary policies, including indefinite detention, denial of work permits, and forced relocation to detention centers like Holot (which operated between 2013 and 2018). Asylum applications are routinely delayed or rejected, leaving individuals in legal limbo without access to healthcare, education, or social services (Willoughby, 2020).

Geographically, many asylum seekers are concentrated in marginalized neighborhoods such as South Tel Aviv, where they face hostility from local residents, media vilification, and neglect from municipal authorities. These communities often work in the informal labor sector, facing exploitative conditions and lacking legal protections. Their visibility as Black, non-Jewish, and non-citizen residents has

made them targets of racist violence and populist rhetoric (Yaron et al., 2013).

Despite these challenges, civil society organizations and grassroots activists have advocated for asylum seekers' rights through legal petitions, public campaigns, and international appeals. However, their efforts are frequently met with governmental pushback and public indifference (Mor, 2021). The treatment of African migrants highlights the racialized boundaries of Israeli citizenship, wherein Jewishness remains the central criterion for belonging.

The plight of African asylum seekers is emblematic of broader global patterns where migration control intersects with racial exclusion, securitization, and neoliberal urban policy. Their continued exclusion raises urgent ethical and legal questions about Israel's adherence to international human rights norms and the racial foundations of its national identity.

6. Methodological Trends in Literature

The empirical studies reviewed employ a diverse array of research methodologies, reflecting both disciplinary breadth and the complex nature of ethnic stratification in Israel. Qualitative approaches, particularly ethnography, in-depth interviews, and discourse analysis, dominate studies on Palestinian citizens (Kanaaneh, 2002; Rouhana & Sultany,

2003), Mizrahim (Yonah, 2011), and African asylum seekers (Yaron et al., 2013). These methods enable researchers to capture lived experiences of exclusion, symbolic violence, and everyday resistance.

Quantitative studies, on the other hand, are particularly prevalent in research on educational disparities and labor market inequalities. For example, Swirski (2015) and Lewin-Epstein and Semyonov (2013) use survey data and statistical modeling to demonstrate the persistence of ethnic wage gaps and stratification in higher education. Administrative datasets have also been used to document spatial disparities in resource allocation across municipalities (Ghanem, 2010).

Mixed-methods approaches are increasingly common, especially in longitudinal studies that track intergenerational mobility among Mizrahim and Ethiopian Jews (Ben-Eliezer, 2008; Elias & Kemp, 2010). However, there is a notable lack of participatory and community-based research, especially involving African asylum seekers and Palestinian youth. This limits the extent to which marginalized groups can influence the research agenda and knowledge production.

Another trend is the increasing use of Hebrew-language grey literature, policy reports, and legal documents. These sources provide important insights into state rationales and the

implementation of exclusionary practices but are underutilized in English-language publications. Bridging this gap remains a methodological challenge for international scholars.

7. Thematic Synthesis and Cross-Cutting Patterns

Across the empirical literature, several recurring themes and patterns emerge. First, formal citizenship does not equate to substantive equality. Palestinian citizens, Ethiopian Jews, and Mizrahim possess Israeli citizenship but continue to face systemic barriers in education, employment, and political representation (Yiftachel, 2006; Ghanem, 2010). This highlights the concept of “graded citizenship,” whereby legal status is filtered through racial, ethnic, and class-based lenses (Shachar, 2009).

Second, spatial segregation is a key mechanism of exclusion. Whether in development towns, Arab villages, or South Tel Aviv, marginalized groups are often geographically isolated from centers of economic power and state investment. This spatiality of inequality is reinforced through zoning laws, urban planning, and housing policies (Kemp & Yiftachel, 2000; Yiftachel, 2009).

Third, symbolic and cultural exclusion persists even where formal inclusion exists. Ashkenazi norms continue to dominate public institutions, shaping representations of national identity,

academic curricula, and cultural capital (Swirski, 2015). This delegitimizes alternative narratives and contributes to the erasure or marginalization of non-Ashkenazi experiences.

Fourth, the securitization of minority identities especially Palestinians and African asylum seekers—represents a broader trend of ethno-national governance. These groups are frequently framed as demographic or security threats, legitimizing surveillance, detention, and legal disenfranchisement (Levy, 2011; Mor, 2021). The state's use of emergency laws and the rhetoric of infiltration reflect deep anxieties about non-Jewish presence within the nation-state.

Finally, while civil society efforts have increased visibility and advocacy for marginalized groups, their impact is constrained by institutional inertia and political hostility. Advocacy efforts for Ethiopian Jews and asylum seekers, though well-organized, face pushback from nationalist parties and public discourse (Herzog, 2004; Arar, 2020). This underscores the limitations of liberal rights frameworks in transforming deeply entrenched ethno-national structures.

8. Conclusion and Directions for Future Research

This empirical review has highlighted the complex and multifaceted nature of ethnic

stratification and social exclusion in Israel.

Through an analysis of over 50 studies conducted between 2010 and 2024, it has shown how citizenship in Israel is not a binary condition but a stratified and negotiated status. The review contributes to Israeli sociology by integrating disparate strands of empirical evidence into a coherent framework that emphasizes institutionalized hierarchy, spatial exclusion, and racialized belonging.

Future research must address several gaps. Longitudinal and intergenerational studies are urgently needed to track how inequalities are reproduced or disrupted over time. In particular, attention should be paid to educational trajectories, labor market integration, and political participation among second-generation Ethiopian Israelis and Mizrahim. Similarly, studies of Palestinian citizens should go beyond discrimination to examine agency, resistance, and emerging forms of political identity.

Another critical gap lies in comparative work. While Israeli sociology has produced robust analyses of internal ethnic divisions, less attention has been paid to comparative frameworks with other settler-colonial or ethnocratic states. Such comparative analysis would enrich both theoretical and empirical understandings of stratified citizenship (Peled, 1998; Yiftachel, 2006).

Finally, there is a need for more participatory and decolonial methodologies. Research agendas should increasingly be shaped by marginalized communities themselves, ensuring that knowledge production does not replicate the hierarchies it seeks to critique. Doing so would not only deepen empirical insight but also challenge the epistemic boundaries of Israeli sociology.

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