

A Muslim Aliyah Paralleled the Jewish Aliyah: Part II, Since to 1948

by Daniel Pipes

“When I saw the Israeli soldiers, I nearly fainted from happiness. I fell on the floor and kissed the earth before their feet. It was as if I was born all over again...I saw a country that cared about its citizens, something that would not happen to such an extent even in Western cultures like the United States.” – Yusuf Samir

Editor’s note: The following analysis makes up the second half of a two-part study. The first part, “[A Muslim Aliyah Paralleled the Jewish Aliyah: Part I, until 1948](#),” appeared in the Summer 2024 issue of the *Middle East Quarterly*.

No, the exuberant statement above was spoken not by a Jew making *aliyah* (*lit.* going up; *fig.* immigration to the Land of Israel) but by an Egyptian journalist and poet, Nabih Sirhan, who changed his name in Israel to Yusuf Samir to hide his identity. Samir likely has the distinction of being the only Muslim twice to flee for his life to Israel. He did so first in 1968 when, after criticizing Egyptian media inaccuracies, he fled the country and, via Libya and Greece, found refuge in Israel, working at Israel Radio’s Arabic service, eventually becoming a citizen.



Yusuf Samir.

The second time took place in 2001, when the Palestinian Authority (PA) seized him and held him for seven weeks as a suspected Israeli “collaborator.” Samir reported that he “was beaten non-stop.” On release from the PA’s tender mercies, he not only spoke of his own deep feeling for the Jewish state (“I place all my confidence in this small country, which I love from the bottom of my heart”),

Muslim immigration began with the birth of Israel and continues to the present.

but also spoke publicly about Israel's virtues (calling it "a land of love") and the Palestinians' deficiencies: "The Palestinians are animals. They are less than human. They are savage beasts. ... the Palestinians do not love. They hate. They should be destroyed."

Samir's double flight to Israel may be unique but it fits into a larger pattern, that of Muslims moving to what the Koran calls the Holy Land (*al-Ard al-Muqaddasa*). I call this *Muslim aliyah*. Neither celebrated nor condemned, individual in nature rather than organized, driven by practical goals rather than by idealism, and smaller than its Jewish counterpart, it is obscure, routine, important, and embarrassing. Obscure, because not part of a formal movement, but representing individual initiative. Routine because not rebuilding an ancient state but a move for personal reasons. Important because of its demographic implications. Embarrassing because it contradicts the Palestinian narrative of Muslim hostility toward the Jewish state.

That immigration began with the birth of Israel and continues to the present: in the first half of 2024, Israeli security sources report, around 4,000 people illegally entered the Jewish state just through its border with Jordan. Among other countries, these migrants came from Jordan, Sudan, Turkey, and Uzbekistan. However, the immigration is best understood divided into two: Palestinian and other Muslims, where

Palestinian is defined as anyone who identifies as such, with the

exception of Arabic-speakers with Israeli citizenship (who by definition cannot make aliyah).

Palestinians

An estimated 600,000 people, predominantly Muslims, fled the newborn State of Israel during its war of independence. A substantial number soon then tried to return to it and some succeeded. Hillel Cohen of the Hebrew University estimates that "More than twenty thousand Arab refugee-infiltrators managed to cross into Israel during its first five years of existence. They hid in Arab settlements and the state granted them Israeli citizenship. This augmented the country's Arab population by about 15 percent." He also notes that "thousands [of them] were killed by the Israeli army."

After this first wave, closed borders kept down the number of Muslim immigrants. Only with the Six-Day War of 1967 did Israel's conquests bring many Muslims under Jerusalem's control. Other than small populations in Sinai and the Golan Heights, all the conquered peoples—West Bankers, Gazans, and eastern Jerusalemites—considered themselves Palestinian. Since 1967, many of them have, legally or illegally, voted with their feet and moved to Israel. With the exception of a few with malign intentions, they did so mainly to take advantage of Israel's superior economy (higher pay, greater work

opportunities), its better services (education, health care, health insurance, pension, law enforcement, water, sewage, trash), and its democracy (the rule of law, freedom of expression).

Palestinians making aliyah fall into a number of distinct categories, including eastern Jerusalemites, husbands and wives, workers, PLO fighters, the beneficiaries of good-will gestures, homosexuals, informants, criminals, and political murderers.

Eastern Jerusalemites: The residents of eastern Jerusalem found themselves annexed to Israel in 1967 and offered citizenship. Choosing in overwhelming numbers to reject that offer, they and their descendants live as permanent residents of Israel. Now numbering about 350,000, they have the right to live anywhere in Jerusalem or in Israel. The non-citizens among them—our concern here—tend to move from eastern Jerusalem to majority Jewish areas of Jerusalem or to pre-1967 Israel for three main reasons.

Some wish to flee the city's tensions, high prices, and (in its remoter areas) paucity of city services. They usually move to predominantly Arab areas of Israel (Jaffa, Haifa, Umm al-Fahm, Nazareth, Ramla, Lod, Abu Ghosh, Beit Naquba), but also to some predominantly Jewish ones, whether in other parts of Jerusalem (French Hill, Neve Yaakov, Pisgat Zeev) or in other cities (Tel Aviv, Eilat).

Others move in reaction to the separation fence that went up between Israel and the West Bank in 2004-05, fearing exclusion from Israel. As the

Jerusalem Post notes, “Eager to maintain their freedom of movement ... tens of thousands of Jerusalem Arabs moved into more central east Jerusalem neighborhoods keeping them on the Israeli side of the barrier.” Or they merely seek convenient access to Israel. Jalah Hussein, an electrical engineer, explains: “If I want to travel to work, or get the kids to school or a medical clinic, it is very difficult,” with crossing times lasting from minutes to hours. Thus did a separation fence, ironically, spur Muslim aliyah.



A sample blue Israeli ID card.

Finally, they worry about losing their Israeli identity cards were Jerusalem divided into Israeli and Palestinian parts, and they lived in PA territory. That would mean losing access to the many advantages conferred by their Jerusalem residency and the resulting blue Israeli ID card. When Jerusalem's mayor in 2011 proposed placing about 60,000 eastern Jerusalemites in the Kafr Aqab, Shuafat, Semiramis, Zughayer, and Atarot neighborhoods under PA rule, the response was predictable: outrage, followed by plans to move into Israel. The city councilor for eastern Jerusalem argued, in a reporter's paraphrase, that

“any change in Jerusalem’s borders would produce a mass immigration of Israeli residents living east of the fence back into Jerusalem in order to keep their residency and rights.” A 2011 survey of eastern Jerusalemites conducted by David Pollock of the Washington Institute for Near East Policy asked if the city were divided into Israeli and Palestinian parts, would they move “to be a citizen of whichever side they preferred”? Very few would move to the PA, but 40 percent said they would probably or definitely move in order to live under Israeli rather than Palestinian rule. That number subsequently went down to 25 percent in 2023.

A seemingly minor humanitarian gesture turned into a back-door ideological Palestinian right of return.

Husbands and Wives: Under a family reunification program in place from 1967 until mid-2003, Israel allowed West Bankers and Gazans married to Israeli citizens—almost all Arab—to enter Israel and acquire permanent residency. Estimates of the total number of spouses permitted to live in Israel vary greatly but are uniformly high for a small country: at least 100,000 (Meron Rapaport), 130,000 in the years 1993-2003 (Carolyn Glick), more than 137,000 (a *Jerusalem Post* editorial), more than 200,000 in 1993-2003 (another *Jerusalem Post* editorial), and 250,000 in 1963-2021 (Kohelet Forum).

Whatever the number, Israeli authorities eventually noticed that a seemingly minor humanitarian gesture had turned into a back-door ideological Palestinian “right of return.” One indication of its political nature: requests

for Israeli citizenship overwhelmingly came from West Bank or Gazan husbands joining Israeli wives, a stark contrast to the normal patrilocal Palestinian practice of wives moving to their husbands.

This awareness led to the passage in 2003 of the “Citizenship and Entry into Israel Law” that blocked Palestinians who marry

Israelis from entering the country. Children of such unions were allowed to live in Israel until they reached 12 years of age, when they had to leave the country. Only the interior minister could make exceptions, granting citizenship to individuals who “identify with Israel,” who make economic or security contributions, or for visits with medical or employment purposes. The 2003 law, in other words, permitted Israel to hold out family reunification as a reward, not a right.

Wives also make aliya, if more rarely. Hamas leader Ismail Haniyeh’s three sisters—Kholdia, Laila, and Sabah—married Israeli Muslim men and moved in the 1970s from Gaza to Tel Sheva, a mainly Bedouin town in Israel. “In a small community like ours there were not enough women to go round, so some of the men would go and look for wives elsewhere,” explained a relative. Compounding the irony, some of their children have served in the Israeli army. The wife of Ahmed Tibi, a former Israeli Arab advisor to Yasir Arafat and a member of the Israeli parliament since 1999, moved to Israel and received citizenship. Mona, the daughter of Ahmed Qurei, a top PLO negotiator,

received a rare Israeli identification card on marrying a Jerusalem Arab after her father met with the Israel's Foreign Minister Tzipi Livni—likely a special favor intended to curry favor with him.

Workers: The large disparity in work conditions and remuneration between the West Bank and Gaza on the one hand and Israel on the other makes the latter an extremely attractive destination for everyone from day laborers to permanent immigrants and unskilled laborers to professionals. The numbers of workers permitted into Israel depends in part on economic factors and in part on security ones, and therefore it has fluctuated considerably. In a revealing 2024 statement, the secretary-general of the Palestine Labor Union, Shaher Sa'ad, estimated that more than 120,000 Palestinians possess Israeli work permits—in addition to about 45,000 illegals. He also revealed that the latter spend \$400 for a ladder to climb over the security fence and about about \$600 to be smuggled in by car.

PLO Fighters: In 1970, more than two hundred PLO fighters escaped Jordanian forces by crossing into the West Bank, where they surrendered to the Israelis. In 1982, another group fled the PLO's rule in Lebanon by going to Israel. In 2007, the Fatah vs. Hamas fighting in Gaza prompted as many as one thousand Fatah fighters to seek refuge in Israel; one of them, waiting at the border with his wife and children, explained to a reporter, "We cannot live in Gaza. Even if I have to sleep here for a year, I will." In 2008, 188 Fatah troops received permission, after laying down their arms, to flee to Israel where they

were handcuffed and strip-searched, then allowed in on a humanitarian basis. But their leader, PA head Mahmoud Abbas, ordered them returned to Gaza, despite the danger, to send a signal of defiance by maintaining a presence in Gaza. One of those troops complained, "Hamas will kill us immediately. It will be a death verdict for us if we go back there."

Beneficiaries of Good-Will Gestures: To strengthen the PA's Abbas, Israel at times permits Palestinians to move to the West Bank or allows illegal migrants to gain permanent residency. An estimated 41 Palestinians from Iraq (out of a total population thought to be about 34,000) did so in 2007, then the numbers jumped: 4,495 in 2008 and 5,000 in 2021. Sometimes, Palestinians are allowed into Israel proper: 3,458 in 2009 and 442 in 2021.

Rumors swirled in 2008 that Prime Minister Ehud Olmert offered to take in 2,000 Palestinians a year for ten years on a basis of family unification, should all the other issues be resolved with the PA, as compensation for the PA foregoing a "right of return" to Israel. Olmert's office denied this report, but Abbas later confirmed it.

Homosexuals: Israel allows a certain number of homosexuals to stay in the country. Thus, a 33-year-old West Banker won temporary residence in Israel in 2008 to join his male lover in Tel Aviv. According to Rita Petrenko, founder of Albait Almukhtalef, an Israeli non-profit helping Arab homosexuals, about 90 individuals from the West Bank had taken refuge in Israel by 2022 due

to persecution at home. Due to a change that year in Israeli law, they now may legally work in the country. At the same time, a complex of regulations, such as having to renew temporary visas monthly, keeps them from settling.



Ahmed Qurei and his daughter Mona.

Informants: Israeli intelligence depends on a wide network of informants, many of them Bedouin; when exposed or in danger of exposure, it may move them to Israel. In one large-scale operation, as Israeli forces withdrew from Gaza in 2005, they evacuated about 250 agents from Dahaniya village, promising them compensation and help with resettlement. The agents' spokesman, Abed Shtawi, talked hopefully of his "future as a Bedouin and an Israeli citizen." In 2008, a number of Gazans living in the Israeli town of Sderot explained what made them switch sides and their appreciation of the Jewish state.

- "I'm very happy that I helped the state of Israel. Here everything is straightforward, not like with the Arabs. Here there is a law and there are rights."
- "When the Israelis ruled Gaza people lived like kings."
- "The only choice is an Israeli military occupation to clean the area [Gaza] of weapons."

Criminals: Some shady Palestinians take extraordinary steps to access Israel. Israel's police in July 2001 accused a Palestinian businessman with a criminal record of fictitiously marrying a new Russian immigrant to obtain Israeli citizenship. It also recommended charging Salah Tarif, a Druze government minister (for Arab affairs) in the Labor government, with "facilitating a bribe and breach of trust" in exchange for legalizing the man's status.

Political Murderers: In April 2002, a Palestinian with an Israeli identity card carried out a suicide bombing, killing 14, at a Haifa restaurant; he could pass through military roadblocks separating Israel from the West Bank by carrying an Israeli identity card and driving a car with Israeli license plates—both issued because his mother was an Israeli Arab. This was the worst but hardly the first such atrocity; already, 87 Israelis had been killed in 19 attacks that in one way or another involved West Bankers or Gazans outfitted with Israeli identity cards who had the run of the country. Yuval Diskin, head of the Shin Bet, reported in 2005 that of 225 Arabs involved in terror, 25 (or 11 percent)

were Palestinians who had moved to Israel on the basis of family reunification.

but illegal migrants have also entered the country, usually to make money. Hassanein finds that most Egyptians prefer not to obtain Israeli citizenship, “as this would make their return to Egypt impossible and endanger their Egyptian citizenship.” That same year, the community founded a non-profit to represent its interests.

Majed El Shafie recounts a somewhat implausible James-Bond-style passage to Israel via



Albeit Al Mukhtalef's logo.

In conclusion, those Palestinians who vote with their feet show an appreciation for Israel that more than balances the horrid things said about it by their chieftains, even when those chieftains are their brother.

Others

Egyptians: In 2009, Egyptian officials estimated that about 20,000 Egyptian citizens had gone to work in Israel and married Israelis, mainly Muslim women. In 2017, an Egyptian community leader in Israel told Haisam Hassanein of the Washington Institute for Near East Policy that they numbered 3,000 to 7,000 persons, mostly spouses of Arab Israelis. Most of them are legal,

Notable Egyptian-Israelis include the afore-mentioned Yusuf Samir; his Israeli-born daughter Chaya, one of the first Muslim women to enlist in the Israel Defense Forces and later a well-known singer; Naglaa Suleiman, who won the Arab Miss Israel contest in 2009; and Noha Hashad, a professor of nuclear science in Egypt who escaped after her pro-Israel views landed her in prison and tortured. Majed El Shafie, born to a prominent Muslim family, converted to Christianity at 18 while in law school and wrote a book about the difference between Islam and Christianity. Also imprisoned and tortured, he escaped by making his way to Taba near the Israeli city of Eilat. El Shafie recounts a somewhat implausible James-Bond-style passage to Israel via the Red Sea:

It is patrolled by both Egyptian and Israeli boats, and either of them will shoot you. But at about 5:30 one day I stole a jet ski and I crossed the border on a jet ski. There is only one way you can get away with doing that, and that's by coming between the two boats—that way they won't shoot because they don't want to shoot each other. That's how I was able

to do it. I got to Eilat and ran into the Princess Hotel where I asked for asylum.

Ibrahim Shahin, a Jerusalem-born Muslim, fled to Egypt following the 1948 war with Israel, married Inshirah, an Egyptian, lived in El-Arish, and had three sons—Nabil, Muhammad, and Adel. After Israel's capture of El-Arish in 1967, the entire family spied on Egypt for Israel. Caught in 1974, Ibrahim was executed, but Inshirah was eventually pardoned and moved to Israel with her sons, where they all converted to Judaism and adopted Hebrew names. "I love being Jewish, the whole family is Jewish," says Nabil, now Yossi Ben-David. His son, Daniel, concurs: "I am Israeli and Jewish and nothing will change that."

The six hundred members of the Azzama, a Bedouin tribe, differed greatly from these elite individuals. The tribe fled Egypt in 1999 to escape a feud with another tribe and ill-treatment by the Egyptian police. Despite an Egyptian official's efforts to convince them to return to Egypt, they sought residential rights in the Jewish state. Similarly, hundreds of Bedouin from the Sinai peninsula gathered in 2007 at Egypt's border with Israel, asking for refuge in Israel on the grounds that Egyptian authorities had mistreated their community.

Africans: I covered this topic in detail in a separate article, "[Muslim Africans' Harrowing Journey to Israel](#)" (*Middle East Quarterly*, Summer 2023). To summarize: They nearly all reached the Jewish state by land via Egypt during the years 2006-12, often

enduring a horrible experience at the hands of either Egypt's authorities, the tribes, or Hamas, leaving many immigrants traumatized, brutalized, or murdered. The total number of illegal migrants to Israel from sub-Saharan Africa is estimated at 55,000, with about 25,000 now in the country.

Individuals and Families: Israel faced a curious invasion in March 2001. A family of sixteen Iraqi Kurds, including four children, after living in Beirut for three years without decent work, hired a taxi to take them to the border with Israel. Once there, this group of unarmed Muslims cut through the wire fence separating the two countries and walked into Israel waving a homemade Israeli flag. The family asked for asylum, was refused, and threatened mass suicide. Israelis publicly fretted about the morality of expelling them, but the authorities forced them across the Lebanese border a day later, leaving the Kurds stuck in a no-man's-land, unable to enter Israel and fearful of returning to Lebanon. Eventually, the story ended happily with their winning asylum in Sweden.

This incident might appear to be eccentric, but it is not, for Iraqi Kurds have often tried to enter Israel. A party of forty-two tried this in early August 2001, ten more then tried later in the same month, and the pattern has often repeated itself since.

A year after the Israeli retreat from Lebanon in 2000, four South Lebanese men crossed into Israel, requesting political asylum; turned down, they returned to Lebanese territory—despite three of them having previously been

jailed in Lebanon for “collaboration with the Israelis.” With time, it became routine to hear the IDF spokesperson make announcements such as, “Yesterday afternoon (August 24, 2003), an IDF force arrested a Lebanese citizen crossing the international border into Israel. An inquiry carried out by security forces concluded that his intentions were not terror related.” He was returned to Lebanon. At certain times, for instance mid-2006, the Israeli border guards apprehended about 600 illegal migrants a day.

The case of Ibrahim Yassin, a Shiite who became Rabbi Avraham Sinai, deserves special mention. His connection to Israel began in 1983 when Yassin, 19, was a cattle farmer in south Lebanon. As his wife went into labor, an IDF officer, Tzachi Bareket, took risks to help her delivery and subsequent recuperation. Grateful, Yassin in turn provided the Israelis with occasional information on the PLO—until Hezbollah suspected him, arrested him, tortured him, and murdered his child. For vengeance, Yassin joined Hezbollah and became a major intelligence asset for Israel, finally fleeing to the Jewish state in 1997, where he converted



Nabil (R) and Inshirah Shahin.

to Judaism and became a Haredi rabbi living in Safed. His son Amos went on to be a decorated soldier in the Golani Brigade’s Battalion 51. Asked about Israel and Lebanon, Avraham replied, “Here it’s heaven, there it’s hell.”

His case fits a pattern. “About 1,000 times a year,” estimates Seth Farber, the director of an organization that assists people to navigate the bureaucracy of Jewish life in Israel, illegal migrants seek to stay in Israel by converting to Judaism. They must prove their sincerity by being interrogated by a committee of government authorities—Interior Ministry lawyers, Prime Minister’s Office representatives, and Conversion Authority rabbis. The committee decides whether the applicant genuinely intends to convert or is gaming the system to stay in the country.

Luckier illegals get jailed in an Israeli prison devoted specifically to such immigrants. Muhammad Mashah, a Jordanian journalist who fled to Israel because he criticized both Jordan’s king and Palestinian violence, sought political asylum in Israel and declared himself almost happy in an Israeli jail: “I just want to live like a human being.”

Khudia Raisi walked to Israel from his native Iran through all of Turkey, Syria, and Lebanon because of his “problems with the regime.” One Iranian dissident wrote that “Israel is my dream,” and in 2020, during the height of the pandemic, Israel’s Foreign Ministry reported a dramatic increase in queries about Israel and in requests about moving to Israel. Indeed, the Jewish state remains a distant aspiration for many Iranians.

Yet further away, Pakistani authorities reported indicting a group of seven of its nationals who had lived in Israel for years, working at menial jobs and sending remittances home. Reports also surfaced about the disappearance of four or five Muslim tourists from Kerala, India, during a tour of Israel in 2023.

Large Groups: In December 1999, as negotiations about the Golan Heights returning to Syrian control became serious, at least 2,000 of the 15,000 Druze residents there made plans to move to Israel proper. The head of one village council explained: “many people here won’t want to live in a Syrian Golan. ... people want quality of life—and they know what Israel has to offer and what Syria has to offer.”

The largest single group of Arabs accepted into Israel was the 6,500 mostly Christian members of the South Lebanon Army who fled to Israel along with the retreating Israeli forces in May 2000; the number of Muslims among them is unclear. A mid-2001 report estimated that 40,000 Jordanians entered Israel as tourists in 2000 but stayed on illegally to work at higher-paying jobs in the Jewish state. When, for security reasons, Israeli authorities rounded up those Jordanians for overstaying their visas, with plans to repatriate them to Jordan, one worker responded with outrage:

I came to Israel five years ago to improve my economic situation. I later married in an Arab villager and now I have two children. I submitted my documents to the

Palestinian Authority in order to have legal recognition as a Palestinian whose family moved to Jordan, and I want to stay here. But the Israeli authorities insisted on deporting me to Jordan.



Rabbi Avraham Sinal (L) and his son Amos look toward the Israel-Lebanon border.

Conclusion

The large-scale influx of Muslims to the Jewish State of Israel began with the origins of the state and has continued until the present. It has several implications. First, growing numbers has cooled their reception. As Israel emerged as an economic success story, Israelis became more wary of non-Jewish immigrants, seeing them as the thin edge of the wedge of uncontrolled influx. What will remain of the Jewish state? Some voices began to worry about an “existential threat” to the country.

Second, Muslim aliyah contributed very substantially to the number of Israel's Muslim citizens. Looking over the nearly two centuries since its takeoff in the 1840s, I estimate that today, three-quarters of them are

immigrants or the descendants of immigrants.

Third, although some immigrants have malign intentions—murder in particular—most seek a better life by making more money, uniting with a fiancée, seeking freedom, or even joining the Zionist experience, flocking

(as American journalist Joseph Farah puts it) “to the tiny Jewish state from virtually every Arab and Muslim land in the world.” The *Jerusalem Post* notes, “Though viciously demonized by the Arab media, Israel curiously remains an attractive destination.” Whether the specific motive, the general point is clear: Zionism has attracted and benefited Muslims as well as Jews.

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