

## Global Issues

### **“No foreign workers, no agriculture, no region”: Thai farmworkers in Israel in the wake of war**

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There is perhaps no more paradigmatically settler-colonial activity than agriculture, especially in the Palestinian/Israeli context. Zionist strategists perceived the takeover of farmland from indigenous cultivators as a primary goal of their colonising project, pursuing it eagerly through purchase until the war of 1948, and primarily through violence since then. More than an economic sector, agriculture has served a strategic role in consolidating control over broad stretches of frontier, as well as the ideological purpose of emblematising the Jewish people’s return to its land (Shafir, 1989; Neumann, 2011). However, *pace* the emergent orthodoxy in settler-colonial studies – which has recently been subjected to strident critiques, not least in the Palestinian/Israeli context – Israeli agriculture has not, for the most part, been characterised by an “eliminationist” attitude towards indigenous labour or by a serious commitment to exclusively employing the labour of settlers.<sup>1</sup> In fact, Israeli agriculture, like other low-wage sectors of the economy, has nearly always depended on Palestinian labour. When the First Intifada of 1987 to 1991 convinced Israeli policymakers that this dependency was dangerous, their response was to replace it not with the more expensive labour of Israeli citizens, but with the similarly cheap and skilled labour of migrant workers. The farm sector would quickly come to recruit the bulk of its workforce from Thailand, while continuing to employ thousands of Palestinians (Farsakh, 2005; Kaminer, forthcoming; Kurlander, 2019; Rajman and Kemp, 2010).

As I have argued before, until 7 October 2023, Israeli policymakers and the public were content to consider Thais a “neutral” third party to the colonial antagonism between Israelis and Palestinians – or between Jews and Arabs, to use the more pointedly racial language common in public discourse (Kaminer, forthcoming). There was nothing inevitable about this outcome, as demonstrated by the “becoming-Jewish” and “becoming-Arab” processes which other immigrant groups who entered the country around the same time have undergone.<sup>2</sup> Rather, the migration regime was deliberately designed to ensure that Thais would cycle quickly out of the country, without integrating into either the subaltern or the superordinate racial group. As “becoming Jewish” would have allowed them to escape the farm sector, with its artificially depressed wages, and since “becoming

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<sup>1</sup> The notion that “elimination of the native” is a hallmark of settler colonialism is generally credited to Patrick Wolfe (2006). For the reception of this notion in Palestine/Israel studies, see Sabbagh-Khoury (2021). For critiques, see Bhandar and Ziadah (2016) and Davies (2023).

<sup>2</sup> Thus, non-Jewish (and non-Arab) immigrants from the former USSR have been accepted as “practically” Jewish for most purposes, while East African asylum seekers, much like Arabs, have been subjected to racialised incitement (see Kalir, 2015). The position of other immigrants, such as Latin@s, along this continuum has been a matter of political contestation (Shapiro, 2013; Paz, 2018).

Arab” would render them a politically dangerous “demographic threat,” this process of neutralising racialisation can be understood as a useful one for both employers and the state (Kaminer, 2019).

By targeting migrant farmworkers as well as Israelis, Hamas’s attack on the Israeli region surrounding the Gaza Strip on 7 October 2023 powerfully undermined this constructed neutrality. Of the hundreds of civilians murdered that day, forty-one were Thai, and thirty-nine Thai nationals were abducted to the Gaza Strip as hostages, of whom six remained there at the time of writing (Kaminer, 2023). Hamas has offered no explanation or justification for putting migrant workers in the line of fire, and it remains unclear to what extent their targeting was planned; but the decision, if there was one, makes strategic sense. In an interview a few days after the attack, a spokesman for an organisation which represents most Israeli farmers, the Moshavim Movement, pointed out that the “Gaza Envelope”, like other frontier regions, is heavily agricultural. “If there are no foreign workers”, he clarified, “there won’t be any agriculture. And if there is no agriculture, there won’t be a region” (Ronen, 2023). In other words, continued colonisation depends on migrant labour. For the forces battling that colonisation, it makes perfect, if brutal, sense to target the people whose labour enables it, even if they are not themselves settlers.

The man from the Moshavim Movement was speaking against the backdrop of an exodus of migrant workers in the wake of the attack, one not limited to the “Envelope” but encompassing the entire country. As Israel launched its cruel war of retribution on the Hamas-ruled Strip, and as hostilities with Hezbollah flared up on the northern border, around a third of the 30 000 Thai agricultural migrants in Israel left the country. With the support of the newly elected Thai government, these workers were in practice refusing to play the role of colonial foot-soldiers to which it suddenly appeared that they had been assigned. The ensuing person-power deficit, severely compounded by a total ban on entry of Palestinian workers from the Gaza Strip and the West Bank, has thrown Israeli agriculture into deep crisis; a similar slowdown in construction, which also depends on both Palestinian and migrant labour, has triggered an unprecedented reduction in Israel’s international credit rating. Representing around three per cent of GDP, agriculture is much less important than construction to Israel’s economy, but it seems that the strategic role it plays in the settler-colonial project entitles it to special consideration. Hence the continued concern of policy-makers – for example in the Knesset’s Foreign Workers Committee – and the creative problem-solving they have engaged in on the sector’s behalf.

Tellingly, the first establishment figure to react to the exit of Thai workers was government minister Gideon Sa’ar, who hectored migrants for “abandoning” their posts and threatened to dock severance payments legally owed them. This was obviously counterproductive, and in the following weeks, Israel relaxed the rules it had put in place to make sure “guest-workers” did not become permanent residents. Migrants who had returned home after their allotted five years were allowed to come back to Israel, and those who had overstayed their visas became eligible for regularisation. For the first time in years, wages rose. In parallel, new workers were hastily brought in from countries such as Malawi and India, without enjoying even the paper-thin protections granted Thai workers by the bilateral agreement which governs their importation. Thus, by late March 2024, the population of migrant farmworkers in the country had returned to its pre-war numbers. Heart-breakingly but predictably, earlier in March, an Indian worker who had been in Israel for only two months was killed by a Hezbollah bomb on the northern border. Meanwhile, the sector’s 20 000 Palestinian workers remain barred from entry and suffer extreme privation, as farms continue to languish for lack of labour.

Given the nearly bottomless abyss of misery in which the “surplus populations” of the Global South are mired, it will probably always be possible to find people willing to risk their lives for the

hard work and meagre wages on offer in Israel. But workers are not as interchangeable and malleable as the Israeli policymakers currently shopping the world for cheap labour like to think. In India, for example, civil-society groups and trade unions have protested the endangerment of migrant workers in the service of Israel's colonial war against the Palestinians. Employers, too, know better than to think of workers merely as abstract units of labour-power, and value the qualities of diligence, discretion, and responsibility that their Thai employees bring to the field (Kaminer, 2022). The alternative to threatening recalcitrant Palestinians and Thais with replacement by a labour-force more amenable to exploitation under pernicious conditions would be a subsidised reconstruction of Israeli agriculture along high-tech, high-wage lines, which would enable the use of citizen labour. While Agriculture Ministry officials have raised this alternative as the optimal route for the agrarian reconstruction of the "Gaza Envelope," it would require substantial public investment – a route which is hardly likely to be adopted as long as the neoliberal Finance Ministry controls spending decisions.

In the short term, Israel's willingness to shut out Palestinian labour for the duration of the war – not to mention the mass death it continues to inflict on the Gaza Strip – seems to vindicate the "eliminationist" school of settler-colonial analysis. But both employers and the security apparatuses are already lobbying hard for the re-admittance of Palestinian workers, each for their own reasons. The "sweet spot" for Israel's colonial capitalism may thus be a state where it *can* use Palestinian labour and turn the privilege of employment into a cudgel for enforcing quiescence (Berda, 2018) – but does not *have to*. Since Palestinian labour cannot be replaced by the much more expensive labour of Israeli citizens, staying in this convenient zone requires the mobilisation of migrant workers. The latter thus contribute an essential service to the reproduction of the colonial structure: a fact that those seeking decolonisation, a task now more urgent than ever, should take into account.

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