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‘National mission’: biopolitics, non-Jewish immigration and Jewish conversion policy in contemporary Israel

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Abstract

A large number of non-Jewish immigrants from the former Soviet Union have arrived in Israel since the late 1980s. This article explores how the Israeli State has responded to this perceived demographic threat by endorsing a pro-Jewish conversion policy targeted at this population of new citizens. By analysing a variety of ethnographic and textual materials, I trace the organizational processes and discursive practices through which conversion has been crafted into a ‘national mission’: an all-encompassing state endeavour whose impetus is a national-Zionist biopolitics. The Foucauldian concept of biopolitics offers a novel way to understand the interface between religious conversion and the nation-state. Specifically, it positions the concept of population as a primary analytical category, thereby enabling us to understand religious conversion as a mechanism of national population policy.

Keywords: Religious conversion; biopolitics; population policy; national mission; Israel; non-Jewish immigration.

Over the last two decades, the emergence of concepts such as nationalism, ethnicity and citizenship has reframed the academic discussions of religious conversion. This development marks the degree to which studies of conversion have shifted in focus from the psychological models that previously dominated scholarship on the subject to more sociological, political and critical approaches. In order to further develop this theoretical trajectory, this article situates conversion in the context of the modern nation-state and its relationship with an immigrant minority group. Through a case study of the Israeli state’s engagement with the conversion of non-Jewish

immigrants from the former Soviet Union (FSU), I will identify the key role of the nation-state in constructing Jewish conversion (*giur*) as a 'national mission'. The expression 'national mission' is used here in both its senses: 'mission' implies a sense of moral duty as well as a call to encourage large-scale conversion; 'national' implies the appropriation – that is the nationalization – of the conversion field by state institutions, as well as the attribution of a national-Zionist logic.¹ In this article I utilize the concept of 'national mission' to demonstrate how, in the wake of the aforementioned waves of non-Jewish immigration (*aliyah*; ascent), the State of Israel has endorsed a pro-conversion policy aimed specifically at this population of new citizens. In so doing, I will draw on the Foucauldian concept of biopolitics (1978, pp. 139–45) to explain the state conversion endeavour.

By analysing this case study in terms of biopolitics, I offer a new theoretical perspective to the emerging critical literature on conversion. In particular, by explicitly positioning the concept of population as a primary analytical category relevant to studies of conversion, the introduction of the concept of biopolitics allows us to theorize the complex interface between conversion and the nation-state in a productive and novel manner. Specifically, it enables us to trace the national rationale and regulatory powers that shape conversion as a field of policy through which the nation-state attempts to control the size and composition of its population. As such, the notion of biopolitics situates conversion policy in relationship to other population policies, thereby locating it within the broader empirical and theoretical framework of the nation-state.

This article is grounded in a long-term (2004–7), multi-sited anthropological study of the state-run conversion project in Israel. In particular, my argument about how conversion policy in Israel has been institutionally and ideologically established as a national mission is based on the analysis of a broad range of research materials collected during this study. First, my argument draws on thirty semi-structured interviews (performed in person, and audio recorded, ranging from one to three hours) which I conducted with current and former conversion agents (from key players such as policy-makers and senior officials, to junior bureaucrats such as conversion teachers and rabbinical judges).² These interviews allowed me to trace the institutional-bureaucratic development of the conversion field from the standpoint of those who envision, craft and enact the conversion policy. These interviews also allowed me to pay particular attention to the discursive dimension of the conversion policy, namely how conversion agents articulate, frame and justify this policy through national-Zionist language. Second, my argument is based on a wealth of informal conversations with or among conversion agents, which I documented during fieldwork at the rabbinical courts and conversion

schools; these exchanges exposed me to the mundane yet powerful national rhetoric that informs the pro-conversion policy in Israel. Third, my argument is further augmented by oral and textual materials which demonstrate how the national mission of conversion is rhetorically addressed, represented and negotiated in public spheres. These materials include presentations given by conversion agents at conferences (which I attended during fieldwork), state documents provided by state agents or accessed by me through state websites (such as policy statements or protocols of parliament committee sessions) and, finally, media coverage (consisting mainly of news media sources such as YNET and *Ha'aretz*) which I systematically collected.³

Theoretical framework: conversion, biopolitics and population policy

To a great extent, the literature on conversion has been shaped by and in reaction to William James's (1997 [1902]) pioneering model, in which conversion is depicted as a total and dramatic change of inner belief. Departures from James's work have developed in a number of directions, the most significant of which for this article is the recognition that conversion is embedded within a matrix of social, political and national meanings. This recognition is evident, for instance, in studies that have demonstrated how cases of enforced religious indoctrination by 'cults' are addressed by states (e.g. Galanter 1989), how conversion functions as a social springboard for minority groups (Gellner 2005) or how it is implicated in the colonial encounter (Hefner 1993). Based on the premise of an overlap between religious and national identity, the modern nation-state is oftentimes at the centre of the politics of conversion (Van Der Veer 1996). To the degree that conversion carries demographic ramifications, desecrates bureaucratic categories, challenges national temporalities and threatens the perceived unity of the nation, it is an 'unsettling act' (Viswanathan 1998, p. xii). Indeed, as numerous studies have indicated, conversion to minority religions often gives rise to grave national fears. This is the case, for example, in Europe, where conversion to Islam is perceived not only as a 'transformation into otherness' but also as a new security threat (Gudrun 2008, p. 392), or in India, where conversion to either Islam or Christianity allegedly defies the Hindu nature of the country (Coleman 2008).

In this article I will show that Israel represents another compelling example in which the interface between conversion and the nation-state can be productively examined. To begin with, Jewish identity – and, therefore, Jewish conversion – rests on a deep affinity between religion and ethno-nationalism. Additionally, Israeli nationalism embraces Jewish (Orthodox) religion in state law and culture (Barzilai 2003). The contemporary demographic situation – to which the Israeli

State responds via its conversion project – makes the interface between conversion and the state in Israel especially pertinent to scholarly analysis. Though a few recent studies of Jewish conversion of non-Jewish FSU immigrants have placed it in the context of the nation-state (Goodman 2008; Neiterman and Rapoport 2009), the state-run conversion project remains under-studied. By shifting attention to Israel's state project, this article offers both an empirical and a theoretical contribution. In terms of the specific case study under examination, I present a novel account of state conversion policy in relationship to non-Jewish FSU immigrants. On a theoretical level, by describing conversion as a biopolitical policy, this article moves beyond the particularities of the Israeli case. To more thoroughly develop this account, I will now turn to the concept of biopolitics.

Of all Foucault's influential concepts regarding modern forms of power, 'biopolitics' bears the most explicit and direct relation to the state. It is outside the scope and intention of this article to review either the history of this concept or the secondary literature about it in their full complexity. What is important for the purposes of this article is the significance of population to the concept of biopolitics. The concept rests on an argument regarding how, since the eighteenth century, population has become a central category of modern governance – a prime object of knowledge and intervention (Foucault 2006 [1991], p. 140). By 'biopolitics', Foucault refers to the deployment of political power – 'an entire series of interventions and regulatory controls' – that shapes the social body (Foucault 1978, p. 139). The concept assumes a political economics in which the population is regarded as a resource and the individual as an object, or a potential productive force, whose daily affairs in a variety of areas (such as health, immigration, reproduction and life-style) are all potentially useful (Dreyfus and Rabinow 1982, p. 139). Whether the aim is reducing, increasing or 'purifying' the population, the individual's objective conditions and subjective choices are factors to be considered, normalized and managed.

Aimed at controlling demographic trends, population policy is a modern biopolitical practice. Scholars have long recognized the role of population policy, especially in the areas of reproduction and immigration, in sustaining racial, ethnic and national ideologies, as well as in both imagining and constituting the social body (Teitelbaum and Jay 1998; King 2002). However, these theoretical terms have generally not been applied in analyses of conversion. Doing so, I argue, is valuable for both conversion and population policy studies. Such an analysis illustrates how the nation-state uses the conversion of individuals as a means for the regulation of population-related processes according to its national demographic ideologies. In terms of these ideologies, it is the accumulated effects of conversion, and its

anticipated mutual benefit for the population and state, that predominate in the formation of state policy. In other words, the conceptual framework of biopolitics helps explain how state conversion policy is directed at subjects as members of populations. It also elucidates how that policy emerges from both the ideals and anxieties that surround national statistics. In the following sections, I will focus on the case study on which my theoretical argument is based.

Non-Jewish immigrants (*olim*) as a national problem

Jewish conversion in Israel has always been a state issue. Given the lack of separation between religion and state, as well as Israel's Jewish self-definition, the state has long subsumed conversion under its control. Since its inception, the Israeli State has played a crucial role in formulating the array of procedures that constitute conversion – especially those of legislation and litigation. Above all, it has secured Orthodox hegemony and has decided who may claim the status of a Jew for matters of immigration, naturalization and civilian registration (see Neuberger 1996).

However, in the wake of extensive waves of non-Jewish FSU immigration since the late 1980s, the Israeli State's involvement in Jewish conversion has taken on new scale and meanings – that of a national endeavour whose impetus is biopolitical. Rather than primarily existing as a facet of the intricate state-religion arrangements in Israel, conversion has also become a route of national population policy: an organized attempt to counter challenging demographic trends occasioned by the unprecedented rate of non-Jewish immigration. For the first time, the Israeli State has taken upon itself the prerogative of conversion, including all the technical, organizational and financial practices that conversion implies. To unpack that constitutive moment, some elaboration on both the circumstances and repercussions of these waves of non-Jewish FSU immigration to Israel is in order.

At the time of its original enactment, the Law of Return (1950) was understood as a Jewish repatriation law. In 1970, as a legislative resolution to a recent political crisis, the law was amended. Consequently, the circle of those entitled to immigrate to Israel under this law has expanded immensely to include not only Jews but also those with Jewish ancestry as well as their spouses.⁴ The opening of the Soviet Union's 'iron gates' two decades later set in motion extensive political and organizational processes which facilitated the arrival of an estimated 1,000,000 immigrants to Israel. Based on the 1970 amendment, and due to the significant rates of intermarriage among Russian Jewry (Chervyakob, Gitelman and Shapiro 1997, pp. 283–4), it is not surprising that a significant and growing segment of this

population consists of immigrants who are not deemed Jewish according to Jewish law (Sheleg 2004, p. 11).⁵ With a population exceeding 300,000, these immigrants are fully eligible for both immediate citizenship and state financial support intended exclusively for *olim*; however, they are neither registered as Jews in the census nor entitled to state-sponsored religious services (e.g. marriage and burial).

Extensive non-Jewish immigration under the most symbolically Zionist law creates a paradoxical social fact. Although the 1970 amendment implies a policy that moves Israel in the direction of becoming what Lustick (1999) calls ‘a non-Arab State’, it simultaneously renders Israel – the State of the Jewish people – less Jewish. Instead of fortifying the national-Jewish regime of citizenship, these immigrants interrupt it by gradually eroding the fragile numerical dominance of the Jewish majority over non-Jewish minorities. Scholarly literature depicts non-Jewish FSU immigration as both a marker and a catalyst of the transformation Israel has been undergoing in terms of its ethno-national character. Along with foreign workers and Falasha Mura immigrants from Ethiopia, non-Jewish immigrants ostensibly challenge the hierarchical ‘incorporation regime’ which characterizes the Israeli ‘border society’ (Shafir and Peled 2002, pp. 317–18). Such groups contribute to the formation of a multi-ethnic and multi-cultural society, signifying the transformation of Israel into a *de facto* ‘normal’ immigration state (Kemp 2007). In keeping with these scholarly descriptions, public discourse portrays non-Jewish FSU immigrants as a distinct group that poses a multi-dimensional challenge to Israeli society. Cases of church construction, social alienation or anti-Semitism that implicate these immigrants are often discussed in ways that echo this description.

In 2003, then prime minister Ariel Sharon imbued the topic of conversion with a tenor of emergency, describing non-Jewish FSU immigration in terms of ‘a national problem’ and explicitly referring to the handling of the issue as ‘a national mission’. Conversion of non-Jewish FSU immigrants has become laden with this particular salience because these immigrants problematize national boundaries that are relevant to population-related processes. In a process Cohen (2006) refers to as ‘sociological conversion’, these immigrants blend in with the Jewish population, adopt Jewish-Israeli culture, serve in the army and inevitably become romantically involved with Jews. As long as demographic concerns are a constitutive tenet of Israeli nationality (an issue that will be discussed below), and to the extent that Jewish endogamy is national in character, it is not surprising that the infusion of non-Jewish immigrants into Israeli society evokes the image of a ‘national problem’.⁶

The state-run conversion apparatus

In reaction to this perceived ‘national problem,’ a series of extensive institutional processes has been implemented. Until the 1990s, the (orthodox) conversion field functioned on a relatively small scale; it was backed only by indirect and limited support from the state and consisted of institutions that operated only sporadically (see Sheleg 2004, pp. 37–8). These institutions engaged mostly with non-Israeli spouses of Israeli citizens and religiously inspired converts.⁷ The contemporary state-run conversion apparatus expands this organizational framework.

Since the late 1980s, in anticipation of mass waves of non-Jewish FSU immigration, the chief Rabbis of Israel have explored ways of better accommodating newcomers and offering them more accessible routes to Orthodox conversion. This attitude has been well-articulated by state agents involved in these early initiatives. For example, as Rabbi Avior, a senior rabbinical judge who played a key role in re-establishing the conversion courts, described to me: ‘My colleagues and I were called by the Chief Rabbis to establish a special rabbinical court for conversion; the main idea was to ease the expected work requirement and to make conversion a welcoming process.’ Rabbi Rosen, the founder of the Conversion Administration, clearly expressed the anxieties that underwrote these early institutional changes. Recalling the words of Rabbi Bakshi-Doron, then the Chief Rabbi of Israel, Rosen said: ‘We cannot continue like this, with a few conversions made here and there, in an incidental manner.’

The idea that conversion should be both welcoming and pragmatic, as expressed by these agents, would eventually be actualized in the form of an all-encompassing state conversion apparatus. Over time, the Israeli State would appropriate virtually all aspects of conversion. During this process, new conversion institutes were established, such as the Conversion Administration (1995; an organizational umbrella responsible for all conversion bodies nation-wide) and the Institute for Jewish Studies (2000; the main conversion school for non-Jewish immigrants). In addition, the Rabbinical Court for Conversion (1999) was re-founded on a much larger scale, and, in 2002, the Israeli army initiated a conversion programme for non-Jewish soldiers. At the same time, numerous state units (including the Ministry of Education, the Ministry of Immigrant Absorption and the Prime Minister’s Office) were called upon to share responsibility for these endeavours. The noteworthy budget increase for conversion-related institutions over these years, from a few million to 50 million shekels a year, adds a clear financial substantiation to this organizational trajectory (Bareket 2005).

This route of accumulated appropriation reveals a deliberate policy aimed at inscribing national-Zionist meanings into the organizational field of conversion. First, the developments described above illustrate how the state has attempted to wrest control of conversion matters from ultra-Orthodox, Haredi circles in order to turn control of them over to Orthodox-Zionist agents. These efforts are part and parcel of an ideological shift towards comparatively liberal and overtly Zionist agents who adhere to statist approaches to conversion. In fact, this shift can be traced back to the 1970s, when the Rabbinical Authority faced a growing rate of intermarriage between non-Jewish female volunteers in the kibbutzim and Israeli Jews (see Sheleg 2004, p. 38). However, it was not until the arrival of immigrants from the FSU that these processes fully matured. Prime Minister Ariel Sharon's decision to appoint Rabbi Haim Druckman, known for his overtly Zionist stance on conversion, to serve as the head of the Conversion Administration in 2003 corroborates this policy. Second, over the years, conversion institutions have been subordinated to non-religious national bodies. In particular, the Conversion Administration and the Institute for Jewish Studies have been integrated into the Prime Minister's Office, the Ministry of Immigrant Absorption and the army, respectively. Such steps reveal the extent to which state authorities have attempted to subject the halakhic issue of conversion to what they perceive to be a national-Zionist calling. However, within Israel's contested politics of religion and state, the religious contingencies of these attempts – namely, the crucial gate-keeping role of the ultra-Orthodox dominated Rabbinate – have repeatedly circumscribed the application of this calling. The 'Druckman affair' (in which a panel of ultra-Orthodox rabbis invalidated conversions authorized by Rabbi Druckman), the refusal of marriage registrars (on behalf of the Rabbinate) to recognize state-certified converts and thereby allow them to marry and the debate over the legality of conversions conducted in the Israeli army, are all important cases for understanding the tense dynamics through which the national project of conversion unfolds. These dynamics foreground not only the contested politics of the *status quo* arrangement, but also the power relationship between Haredi and Orthodox-Zionist authorities, as well as the complex intersection in Israel of state, religion and nationalism.

The scheme of 'national mission' and its discourses

At the centre of this organizational endeavour, one can find the formative concept of 'national mission'. The following representative statements, given by key agents involved at a variety of levels with the conversion project, clearly articulate this discursive framework: Ya'akov Edri (then the Minister of Immigrant Absorption) states:

‘Conversion is a national and strategic mission of paramount significance for Israel’s demographic future’ (Ministry of Immigrant Absorption 2007). Rami, an administrator at the Institute for Jewish Studies, puts the issue in even starker terms: ‘The State of Israel has a problem. This is the Jewish State; I don’t want anybody to get confused about this. I want a solid, clear Jewish majority to be sustained all the way. This is precisely why I’m taking part in this national mission.’ Similarly, Avra’am, a teacher at the Institute for Jewish Studies, frames the conversion issue in national-Zionist terms:

I see conversion as a national mission. Conversion is the most pressing issue at the moment because if we don’t do it, like some Haredi people suggest, the State of Israel will soon turn into a non-Jewish state. . .when you have 300,000 non-Jewish immigrants, such a possibility cannot be ignored.

The rhetoric of ‘national mission’ is saturated with a demographic anxiety regarding national survival. This rhetoric is augmented by Zionist and religious discourses of ‘return’, both of which shed light on the reasons why the non-Jewish FSU immigrants have become the objects of a ‘national mission’. In what follows, I will further explicate these two discursive frameworks.

When agents of conversion talk about the conversion project, they talk about numbers; they talk about demography. The same holds true for journalistic coverage, as well as public commentary and conferences on conversion. The point of departure for this discourse is the number 300,000 – a figure which has developed into a monstrous icon epitomizing the ‘national problem’.⁸ The number is accompanied by anxiety-provoking demographic calculations regarding interrelated population trends. The most significant of these trends are related to the immigration and fertility patterns of non-Jewish FSU immigrants: the number of non-Jewish immigrants that come to Israel annually and the number of non-Jewish babies born from this population each year. These calculations take on an even graver significance as conversion agents frequently juxtapose them to the low number of converts.⁹ The gap between these calculations and the low number of converts reinforces what seem to be a series of uncontrollable demographic trends, on the one hand, and a failed national project, on the other (Shahar 2007).¹⁰ Moshe Adorian, a senior administrator in the Education Ministry exemplifies this reasoning: ‘Statistic-wise, there are more non-Jewish babies born each year than there are converts. So, in effect, we haven’t done anything meaningful. We wanted to lower the number 300,000, but we didn’t really succeed in changing it.’ In another typical depiction of the issue, Member of Parliament David Rotem argued the following in a parliament

committee session: 'If we don't carefully handle the issue of conversion, we'll find ourselves in one generation with 800,000 non-Jews. In 40 years we'll have 2.5 million non-Jews' (The Knesset 2007).

The prominence of numerical thinking and demographic consciousness in the discourse of conversion is not surprising. Statistics is both an epistemology and assemblage of techniques of power intrinsic to the modern state. Due to its simplification, statistics enables the modern state to 'see', map and regulate social reality (Hacking 1991). In Israel, one can hardly over-emphasize the prominence of demographics, which inform both debate and policy decisions in a variety of domains (see, among others, Liebler and Breslau 2005; Cohen 2006, pp. 93–4; Stypinska 2007). Demography in these contexts relates to both the absolute and the relative size of the Jewish population in the State; it is broadly understood as a crucial aspect of Jewish survival.

The demographic discourse creates a temporal frame of emergency: time is running out and, without immediate and intensive state intervention, the non-Jewish population will tip the demographic scale and win the battle. Words such as fear, anxiety and concern recur in all the arenas in which conversion is publicly addressed. 'We are distressed', says Kolet Avital (The Knesset 2004), a secular member of Knesset in a parliamentary committee. 'We look at the conversion numbers with anxiety.' In a similar vein, as former Minister of Immigrant Absorption Yair Zaban describes in a 2008 conference on conversion, 'If I were a religious person, I would make *kriah* and sit *shiv'ah* [mourning practices] because there is no way we'll be able to convert a substantial part of the 300,000.'

Together with the demographic rhetoric, 'the national mission' is structured within, and therefore morally legitimized, by the idea of 'return'. This idea rests on a Zionist and religious imaginary of the ingathering of the exiles, according to which FSU immigration is interpreted as a massive return to the Jewish fold. The fact that these immigrants, regardless of their halakhic status, have come to Israel after years in the communist-atheist regime, an environment often described by conversion agents as 'the anti-Jewish wilderness' where Jews experienced what is dramatically referred to as 'the holocaust of Soviet Jewry', only intensifies the emotional tenor associated with the notion of 'return'. This notion grants the conversion project a sense of inter-Jewish venture, as is well articulated in the following comments made by Rabbi Druckman during a 2006 conversion conference: 'Our sons are coming back home. We are talking here about those who were lost and dispersed. Now they are found.'

In addition, the fact that these immigrants belong to the Jewish State by virtue of the Law of Return, and that they serve in the Israeli army, imbues the ethno-national discourse of 'return' with a republican quality. In the public discussion of conversion it is often argued

that, in exchange for joining the Jewish nation and partaking in all civilian and national duties, the immigrants are morally and politically entitled to state-sponsored conversion – to a service that will facilitate their accommodation to Israeli society. Shmuel Yeselson, a senior official at the Conversion Administration (The Knesset 2009), echoes this sentiment regarding non-Jewish FSU immigrants in a parliamentary committee session dedicated to conversion: ‘Those brave people...they are sons and grandsons of Jews, who immigrated here by virtue of the Law of Return, they serve the country, they are loyal to her and they are willing to undergo conversion...we must provide them with this service.

National missionary spirit

In every government meeting it is mentioned: we must convert as many as possible. (Chashi Friedman, The Institute of Jewish Studies)

The hope of converting ‘as many as possible’ is voiced everywhere in the field of conversion. To better pursue that aim, a special inter-ministerial committee (appointed in 2007 by Ehud Olmert, then the prime minister), has been reviewing the bureaucratic efficiency of the conversion apparatus and suggesting new methods for increasing conversion rates (Ministry of Immigrant Absorption 2007). In fact, the main conflicts among the key players in the field centre on the institutional accountability for what is perceived as ‘numerical failure’ of the state-run conversion project.¹¹ Taking these numerical considerations into account, conversion agents have developed institutionalized means of encouraging conversion aimed specifically at non-Jewish FSU immigrants.

The first manifestation of these processes is the removal of financial barriers – implying almost full state subsidization of the process. The tuition of the conversion school has been reduced to a negligible amount, the conversion court fees have been cancelled and the conversion certificate is issued for free. Whereas various bureaucratic services cost a considerable sum of money in Israel (for example, to get married or to receive a driver’s license), state-run conversion is free of charge. This financial benefit cannot be underestimated, particularly when it comes to first and second generations of immigrants. Second, the conversion process has been the object of a massive state campaign, run on various Russian-language communication channels. The campaign invites non-Jewish immigrants ‘to give conversion a try’, casting it as a relatively pleasant experience. One of the central

officials at the Institute for Jewish Studies clearly illustrates this marketing rationale:

I market the program. Yes, and I'm not ashamed to say it. I do it very aggressively. For example, we get into immigrants' Hebrew language schools and talk about our program. We go to concerts and hand out booklets. We distribute pamphlets in mailboxes in areas known to be populated by Russian immigrants.

Well aware of the cultural orientations of Soviet Jewry, namely of its emphasis on descent, kinship and ethnic Jewishness, as well as its clear secular tendencies (see, among others, Chervyakob, Gitelman and Shapiro 1997), the conversion campaign targeted at FSU immigrants is deliberately framed in national, rather than religious, terms. This intentional strategy is articulated in the words of Moshe Adorian, a senior administrator in the Education Ministry:

I would love to do the marketing pitches. I would say to the immigrants: 'Think about the fact that you actually came here by virtue of having a Jewish ancestor. Think about your grandfather and great grandfather who were observant Jews; here we have created the opportunity for you to re-connect with them – in *your* state, in *your* land.' We have to speak to the FSU immigrants in a national-Zionist language...this is the right language for these immigrants.

Third, creatively formulated and designed conversion programmes have emerged in promising new locations: youth dormitories, high schools and, most importantly, the army. The latter has become a prominent route of state-run conversion, acclaimed for the impressively high numbers of conversions it conducts annually (Pepper 2007). This numerical accomplishment is rooted in a pro-conversion policy sanctioned by the army, a policy which includes the following stipulations: every non-Jewish soldier must attend the preliminary conversion class, and only then can he or she concede his or her participation; every officer must enable his non-Jewish soldiers to participate in the conversion course at some period during their service. In addition to these stipulations, the army has begun promoting the option of conversion in its pre-service communications with prospective soldiers (The Knesset 2005a).

I argue that all these aforementioned mechanisms combine to generate what can be understood as 'a national missionary spirit'. Obviously, this spirit differs from the well-documented missionary tendencies characteristic of Christian or new religious movements. Shaped by specific Jewish and Israeli sensibilities, the missionary spirit

of Israel's conversion project is implicit, subtle and discreet, and is derived from national rather than religious ideology. In what follows, I will elaborate on the particular features of this 'national missionary spirit'.

The word 'missionary' is awkward in the Jewish-Israeli context. Indeed, it is conspicuously absent from the conversation about conversion. Conversion agents may mention the term and discuss it, but they do so in an apologetic and self-deprecating manner; their discomfort is palpable. As Rabbi Shaul Ferver, who is highly involved in the conversion field, conveyed to me:

At the first session of the forum for conversion in the prime-minister's Office, I asked the following question: 'do we or don't we want to be missionaries?' I've still not received an answer to this question. I believe people want to missionize, but they are not willing to admit it.

This discursive sensibility stems from the confluence of two cultural-historical factors. The first is the fear of, and resistance to, religious missionizing – sentiments which are structured deep into Jewish self-conceptions.¹² The second is the concern regarding the issue of cultural missionizing to immigrants by the Israeli State; specifically, the fear of falling back into the paternalism that shaped Israel's enterprise of immigrant absorption in the past. With these sensibilities in mind, it is not hard to understand why conversion agents attempt to avoid missionary connotations; this is clearly evident, for example, in the concerns of Kolet Avital: 'The problem, and we discussed it more than once in this committee, is the fear of being perceived as missionaries' (The Knesset 2005a). It is also not hard to understand why conversion agents favour using non-religious mediators (such as the Ministry of Immigrant Absorption) as subcontractors to disseminate and operate conversion programmes; as Rabbi Rosen described to me, 'Spreading conversion must not be the job of the rabbinate, since the halakha forcefully objects to missionary tendencies. However, there is no problem with public organizations that tell those living in Israel: "Come and convert".'

The missionary spirit of the conversion project is a selective one. From the outset, it is directed at citizens by virtue of the Law of Return, and conversely it excludes non-citizens (most notably foreign workers and tourist-visa holders) in order to try and prevent conversion from becoming a route to citizenship. This selective quality is manifested in the discursive as well as bureaucratic distinctions made with regard to the aforementioned populations. For example, non-Jewish immigrants are oftentimes referred to as 'those in need of conversion' (*teunei giur*), a reference that implicitly calls into question

whose need it is – that of Israel or the convert. Moreover, whereas the available conversion school programmes for citizens are, as mentioned, subsidized, the ones available for temporary residents (spouses of Israeli Jews) or tourist-visa holders are not. As I learned from several state officials, a citizen is entitled to begin conversion without any preliminary commitment while non-citizens undergo rigorous religious tests and tolerate the drawn-out bureaucratic procedures of a special committee within the Interior Ministry. In keeping with these bureaucratic distinctions, no missionary marketing activity is conducted outside the FSU immigrant community. Not surprisingly, this policy has yielded drastically higher numbers of converts among FSU immigrants than among foreign nationals; for example, in 2009, 1,801 conversion certifications were issued for FSU converts, whereas only 194 such certificates were issued for foreign nationals (Itim 2010).

Intimately associated with the issue of fertility, the missionary spirit is also gendered. Although this quality is not translated into concrete policy terms that privilege female over male converts in conversion court procedures, these dynamics are clearly illustrated by both conversion discourse and statistics.¹³ The matrilineal principle which determines Jewish identity marks women – particularly young women of a childbearing age – as ‘those who are in need of conversion’. From this standpoint, it is as if the temporal framework of emergency intersects with, and becomes dependent upon, the biological clock of fertility – thereby reinforcing the national importance of converting young women before they bear non-Jewish children. The gendered nature of this missionary spirit is well illustrated by David Bass, a senior rabbinical judge:

Allegedly, the conversion numbers are low. However, we have to emphasize a detail that often goes overlooked: a majority of the converts are young women, mostly single, aged 17–25. A quick calculation leads to the conclusion that a third of non-Jewish women go through conversion. This is not an insignificant achievement... the conversion of young women is the truly important part of the project. (Bass 2007, p. 32)

Similarly, as Rabbi Rosen claimed during a parliament committee meeting, ‘For the national mission, I propose that we recruit the female converts. We should do this because of fertility issues. It is obvious to everybody that our main motivation is fertility’ (The Knesset 2010).

Such distinctions are rooted in the logic of the modern nation-state. Specifically, they demonstrate the extent to which the missionary spirit is a national, biopolitical one, sustained by the blurry line between nationality, religion and citizenship in Israel and connected to national

population trends. This point explains the deep involvement and support of secular Zionist politicians in the conversion project. In this sense, the sentiments of Ofir Pines, a secular Zionist parliament member, are quite common: 'The conversion of as many non-Jewish olim as possible is in our national interest. Conversion serves our collective aspiration. It is our legitimate right to try and maintain the Jewish majority and hegemony of the state' (The Knesset 2005b).

Conclusion: conversion as a national biopolitical policy

Usually I am invited to speak about conversion. Several weeks ago I was invited to speak about fertility. At first, I had no idea what I should discuss. Later I thought to myself, 'oh well, what is the difference really? In both cases we are devoted to making as many Jews as possible' (A rabbinical judge shares an anecdote with colleagues during a recess between conversion court sessions).

In this article I analysed the discourses, organizational developments and bureaucratic arrangements that surround and constitute Jewish conversion of non-Jewish immigrants in contemporary Israel. I demonstrated how this field has been rendered into a national mission – a state-run project underwritten by a national-Zionist biopolitical logic. From the standpoint of demography alone, this project has failed; the project has not produced the kind of results bureaucrats have envisioned. However, the fact that the gender script has been actualized and that the rate of conversion conducted in the army has steadily increased does indicate that the state's biopolitical goals underpinning the conversion project have been, to a limited extent, realized.

I have striven to show how the concept of biopolitics can fruitfully explain Israel's pro-conversion policy. Specifically, this concept sheds light on how the state-run conversion endeavour in Israel has been (1) shaped by anxieties over non-Jewish immigrants and by the sense of moral duty to counter these challenging demographic trends, and (2) how conversion is intended to be of mutual benefit to both the state and the population (the Jewish-Israeli population in general and the non-Jewish FSU immigrants in particular). Ultimately, the concept of biopolitics explains how Jewish conversion has become a route through which the Israeli State seeks to produce and reproduce the nation as Jewish.

In this sense, the conversion project can be understood as a national population policy that accompanies two older and more established areas of pro-Jewish population policy: reproduction and immigration.

An abundant body of scholarly literature has shown how these policies have been employed in the name of national-Zionist ideologies (see, for example, Portugese 1998; Kahn 2000; King 2002; Kimmerling 2004). However, this article is the first to explore state conversion policy as an axis of Jewish national biopolitics. As Susan Kahn writes, this axis has always been a potential resource for the Israeli state:

Jewish citizens of the Jewish state come from only three places: from immigration, from conversion and from Jewish mothers. Since immigration is unpredictable and conversion hotly contested, Israeli Jewish women are left as the primary agents through which the nation can be reproduced as Jewish. (Kahn 2000, p. 4)

In this study, I have shown that conversion, though as hotly contested as ever, has become more than just a potential resource for regulating population trends in Israel; it has emerged with practical repercussions in the context of non-Jewish FSU immigration and has consequently been transformed into an active and more established set of practices. This endeavour is empirically rooted in pro-Jewish immigration policy. Moreover, to the extent that it renders women (in this case, female converts) as the primary agents through which both non-Jewish reproduction is controlled and Jewish reproduction is secured, conversion in Israel is paradigmatically associated with a pro-natalist fertility policy. As such, by virtue of its intersection with other national population policies, the conversion field reveals once again the gendered nature of the nation-state (Yuval Davis 1997).

The Israeli state-run conversion project is clearly distinct; however, the idea of examining conversion in terms of biopolitics lends further analytic power to studies of conversion in other settings as well. Although previous studies have recognized the interface between conversion and the nation-state, the role of conversion in state ethno-national demographic policies has remained understudied. Analysing conversion as a biopolitical issue calls attention to (1) how conversion policies are concerned with population management and therefore with individuals as members of a particular population; (2) how the potential convert in his or her subjective choices is nationally 'useful'; (3) and how states strive to control the size and character of their national communities not only through the often-documented routes of fertility and immigration policies but through the route of conversion as well. With regard to all of these issues, exploring conversion as a biopolitical matter advances and deepens our understanding of the political dynamics of conversion in the nation-state.

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Notes

1. By describing this mission as 'national-Zionist', I mean to qualify the project (and its constitutive logic) as one that is anchored in a Zionist agenda aimed at the preservation of Israel as a Jewish State for the Jewish people.
2. Senior officials, some of them well-known figures, appear with their full names; in the case of junior agents, I have used only their first names.
3. Micro-level processes of conversion (which I also documented during fieldwork in conversion schools and rabbinical courts), as well as the converts' perspective on these processes are beyond the scope of this article.
4. The amendment (4a) states that: 'The rights of a Jew under this Law and the rights of an *oleh* under the Nationality Law (1952) . . . are also vested in a child and a grandchild of a Jew, the spouse of a Jew, the spouse of a child of a Jew and the spouse of a grandchild of a Jew' (Jewish Virtual Library).
5. In addition, the aggressive manner in which aliyah agents are perceived to operate throughout the FSU has been publicly criticized for augmenting the already significant scope of FSU non-Jewish immigration.
6. Non-Jewish aliyah is not exclusively associated with immigration from the FSU. Due to high and still growing rates of intermarriage across Jewish communities, non-Jewish immigrants arrive in Israel under the Law of Return from various countries. However, the extent of non-Jewish immigration from the FSU has been incomparably high, therefore resulting in a state-run conversion project (the apparatus of which also handles the conversion of other populations).
7. These institutes include: conversion schools, where converts attain knowledge of Jewish law and tradition; rabbinical courts, where conversion petitions are judged; ritual baths, where converts are immersed in water in a ceremony in which they formally become Jews.
8. In contrast to this argument Lustick identifies a conspiracy of silence in relation to the estimated number of non-Jewish FSU immigrants. See Lustick (1999).
9. In various surveys, non-Jewish FSU immigrants display a strikingly low motivation for conversion, mostly either because they do not see conversion as a necessary step for their integration or because the religious and bureaucratic requirements discourage them. See Sheleg (2004).
10. According to official state data, 6,538 non-Jewish FSU immigrants were converted in Israel between 2000 and 2006; see The Knesset (2007), <http://www.knesset.gov.il/mmm/heb/index.asp>
11. Together with the lack of a formal and credible state system of numerical data, these conflicts among the conversion institutions explain why, during my fieldwork, I was informally exposed to inconsistent data about the number of conversion applications,

conversion certificates and actual converts. Assessing the reliability of any particular account of conversion data was further complicated by the differing interests and agendas of the various institutions involved in the conversion field. With each institution (i.e. conversion schools, rabbinical courts, etc.) under pressure to demonstrate its productivity and efficiency as defined by the demographic imperatives of the national mission, agents often defended their own actions while deflecting blame to other institutions. These dynamics make it difficult to acquire a reliable account of conversion statistics from any of the relevant institutes.

12. The connotations of the word ‘missionary’ are negative in other Jewish-Israeli contexts as well. This connotation is evident, for example, in the aggressive Ultra-Orthodox response to non-Jewish missionary groups who aim to convert Israeli Jews or in the antagonism publicly expressed by secular Jews towards the missionizing efforts led by the ultra-Orthodox, primarily the Shas and Chabad movements.

13. A few sources of numerical data can be juxtaposed in order to shed light on the extent to which conversion is gendered. According to the information centre of the Israeli parliament, 3,510 out of 4,584 conversions conducted in the army up until April 2007 were of women (see the Knesset (2007), <http://www.knesset.gov.il/mmm/heb/index.asp>). According to the Institute for Jewish Studies (in their 2005 internal summary booklet), 64 per cent of the conversion students are women. According to Rabbi Rosen (The Knesset 2010), ‘80 percent of the converts are women at the age of fertility’.

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