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# Who are the immigrants that Israeli Jews prefer? The interplay between reasons for migration, religion, and religiosity

Rebeca Raijman<sup>1</sup> , Anastasia Gorodzeisky<sup>2</sup>, Moshe Semyonov<sup>2</sup> and Thomas Hinz<sup>3\*</sup>

\*Correspondence:  
thomas.hinz@uni-konstanz.de

<sup>1</sup> Department of Sociology and Anthropology, University of Haifa, Haifa, Israel

<sup>2</sup> Department of Sociology and Anthropology, Tel-Aviv University, Tel-Aviv, Israel

<sup>3</sup> Department of History and Sociology, University of Konstanz, Konstanz, Germany

## Abstract

This study focuses on the impact of three attributes of migrants – their reasons for migration, religion, and level of religiosity – on public support for allowing migrants to come and live in Israel. We rely on a factorial survey that was conducted in a representative sample of the Israeli Jewish population analyzing the assessments of 600 respondents of various vignettes ( $N=3,595$ ) of hypothetical migrants about admitting them to the country. The findings reveal that Israeli Jews do not evaluate all immigrant groups equally. Preferences for specific groups of migrants are primarily structured along two main attributes: religion and reasons for migration. The result is a hierarchical distinction between immigrants of Jewish ancestry and those who are non-Jewish. Jewish repatriates are perceived as “deserving migrants” who can make legitimate claims about belonging to the host society. As such, they enjoy an ethno-religious premium based on ancestral rights. By contrast, there is less support for the entry of non-Jewish migrants, whether asylum seekers or labor migrants, as their presence is viewed as a threat to the Jewish character of the state and the hegemony of the Jewish majority. The impact of the immigrants’ attributes on attitudes varies based on the level of religiosity of the Jewish population, especially in the case of non-Jewish migrants. Support is stronger in the case of secular respondents and much weaker among their more religious counterparts. The findings are discussed in light of existing theories.

**Keywords:** Migration, Discrimination, Ethnicity, Religion, Religiosity, Israeli society

## Introduction

The place of immigrants in many Western nation-states has become one of the most salient issues shaping public debates in contemporary societies. Although immigrants make the receiving country their new home, the native population often views them not only as outsiders and as a threat to their economic well-being, but also as a threat to cultural values and national homogeneity (e.g., Lahav, 2004; Semyonov et al. 2006, 2008; Ben-Nun Bloom et al. 2015a). Migrants’ characteristics such as their ethnicity, reasons for migration, religion, and level of religiosity play a major role in shaping anti-immigrant sentiment (e.g., Helbling et al. 2022, Semyonov et al. 2023, 2024). Specifically, studies on the issue suggest that the local population is likely to oppose migrants of different

ethnicities and religions (e.g., Ben-Nun Bloom et al. 2015b; Bansak et al. 2016; Hellwig & Sinno, 2017), especially Muslims. Research has also established that nation-states are more likely to embrace refugees and asylum seekers than labor migrants (e.g., Verkuyten, 2004; Czymara & Schmidt-Catran, 2017; von Hermanni & Neumann, 2019; Lawlor & Paquet, 2022). They are also much more opposed to the entrance of very religious immigrants than secular ones (e.g., Ben-Nun Bloom et al. 2015b; Helbling et al. 2022).<sup>1</sup>

Previous studies conducted in several democratic liberal countries in Europe repeatedly show that when the impact of religion (religious denomination) and religious behavior (level of religiosity) of the migrants on attitudes are considered simultaneously, it is the level of religiosity but not religious affiliation that explains antagonism towards migrants. Thus, animosity toward migrants (especially Muslims) is the result of the rejection of fundamentalist forms of religiosity that are perceived as a threat to the core values of liberal host societies (e.g., Helbling & Trautmüller, 2020; Helbling et al. 2022).

In the present paper we aim to test whether the findings from European democracies also apply in the case of Israel, an ethnic democracy where the criteria for belonging are defined along the ethno-religious axis, not a civic one. We contend that in societies such as Israel, where religion is regarded as a core component of ethno-national identity, religious membership becomes the most salient symbolic boundary (Bail, 2008; Ladini et al. 2021, p. 397) that drives intolerance, prejudice and anti-immigration sentiments (Bagno-Moldavsky, 2015).

Our study adds to the literature on the sources of attitudes towards immigrants by focusing on the impact of three attributes of migrants – their reasons for migration (i.e., repatriates, labor migrants, or asylum seekers), religion, and level of religiosity – on public support for or opposition to allowing migrants to come and live in Israel. These three attributes are of special significance in the case of Israel, which defines itself as a Jewish and democratic state and the homeland of the Jewish people. As an ethno-national state, ethnic-religious identity serves as the foundation for membership in Israeli society and as the yardstick by which the entitlement to rights is defined for both natives and migrants (Kimmerling, 1999).

To examine the effects of migrants' attributes on attitudes of Israeli Jews toward immigrants we rely on a factorial survey design (FSD) conducted on a representative sample of the Israeli population. Specifically, the research design enables us to identify (1) the unique effects of migrants' reasons for migration, religion, and level of religiosity on attitudes toward them; (2) possible interaction effects between the migrants' reasons for migration, religion, and religiosity; and (3) interactions between the respondents' level of religiosity and the migrants' religion, religiosity, and reasons for migration. Due to our focus on Israel, we first present a brief review of the context of migration in Israeli society. Then, we review the relevant theories and introduce our theoretical expectations and hypotheses. After the method section, we present the main findings followed by a discussion of the results in light of the theories.

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<sup>1</sup> For a review on how migrants' attributes affect public attitudes towards migrants in survey experiments, see Dennison, 2022, p. 10-11.

### Israel as a country of immigration

Israel is an ideal setting for testing theoretical expectations regarding the relationship between migrants' religion, level of religiosity, and reasons for migration and public attitudes toward immigrants. Until the 1990s immigrants to Israel were mostly of Jewish descent, entering the country under the Law of Return. This law created the framework that grants Israeli citizenship to Jews immediately upon arrival.<sup>2</sup> Following a 1970 amendment, the rights conferred by the Law of Return were extended to the children and grandchildren of Jews and to their nuclear families (even if they are not Jewish).<sup>3</sup>

Since the early 1990s Israel has experienced three new types of non-Jewish migration flows: (1) non-Jewish immigrants arriving under the 1970 amendment to the Law of Return, (2) labor migrants, and (3) asylum seekers (Raijman, 2020). For the first time, the 1990s waves included an increasing number of immigrants who were not Jewish according to *halakha* but who entered Israel under the Law of Return. Most of these migrants came from the former Soviet Union and Ethiopia. By the end of 2022, they accounted for about 5.7% of Israel's total population (Central Bureau of Statistics, 2023).

Since the mid-1990s, labor migration has also become a significant feature of Israeli society, when a temporary migration program for low-skilled foreign workers was enacted to replace Palestinian commuters from the West Bank and the Gaza Strip (Kemp & Raijman, 2008). Labor migrants are formally recruited for three main sectors: construction (mainly from Moldova, Ukraine, and China), agriculture (mainly from Thailand), and long-term care for the elderly and the handicapped (mainly from the Philippines but also from India, Nepal, and Sri Lanka). By the end of October 2022, 133,648 labor migrants arriving through formal recruitment were residing in Israel. Of these, 19% had no work permits (PIBA, 2022).

In addition, beginning in 2005 a new flow of migration began as African asylum seekers clandestinely crossed the Egyptian-Israeli border. By the end of October 2022, 25,450 asylum seekers - mostly from Eritrea and Sudan - were residing in the country (PIBA, 2022). The Israeli government has granted temporary "group protection" status to asylum seekers from Sudan and Eritrea. However, this protection does not include any entitlement to civil rights and social benefits and can end at any time. The state has enacted several practices to exclude asylum seekers from Israeli society and deter new ones from arriving. Examples include border control policies, the construction of detention centers and a fence along the Egyptian border, and the offer of limited legal status and a very minimal set of rights. Indeed, asylum seekers in Israel face a complex situation in terms of policy, legal status, and rights. In sum, the Israeli regime of incorporation reflects a double standard: an inclusionary model for Jewish migrants but an exclusionary model for non-Jews.

Several studies conducted in Israel show that the majority of Jews support the entry and integration of Jewish immigrants but strongly oppose both the admission and integration of non-Jewish immigrants (Raijman & Semyonov, 2004; Canetti-Nisim

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<sup>2</sup> According to the *halakha* (Jewish law), a Jew is a person who was born of a Jewish mother or has converted to Judaism and who is not a member of another religion.

<sup>3</sup> According to the 1970 amendment, the rights of the Law of Return are also conferred on non-Jews who are the children and grandchildren 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. Thus, for example, a Muslim or Christian would be able to enter the country as a repatriate because he/she was married to a Jew.

et al. 2008; Raijman, 2010; Ariely, 2011; Gorodzeisky, 2013a; Hochman & Hercowitz-Amir, 2017, Hercowitz-Amir et al. 2017; Raijman et al. 2022; Hochman & Raijman, 2022). The focus of these studies is on the effect of respondents' characteristics on attitudes towards different migrant groups rather than the effect of the migrants' attributes on these attitudes.

Using an experimental survey design, we sought to disentangle the simultaneous effects of three characteristics of migrants (reasons for migration, religion, and religiosity) on attitudes towards them, and to examine these effects across individuals with different levels of religiosity. By so doing, we hope to improve our understanding of the mechanisms that promote exclusionary/inclusionary attitudes towards different groups of migrants.

## **Theoretical background**

### **In-group favoritism, perceived threats and migrants' religion**

To analyze the role of religion and the ways by which it affects attitudes towards immigrants, we rely on social identity theory. According to this theory, people derive a sense of self from identification with a social group (in-group). Such identification promotes their self-esteem and helps sustain the group's social identity. One of the key processes associated with social identity is intergroup bias, which leads to a positive evaluation of the in-group relative to the out-group (in-group favoritism), and a negative evaluation (derogation) of the out-group (Brewer, 2001; Sniderman et al. 2004).

Previous studies from other countries focusing on the role of migrants' religion on public attitudes suggest that individuals tend to have positive attitudes about immigrants they regard as belonging to the same ethnic or religious group as them. They also tend to have exclusionary attitudes about immigrants from religions other than their own. One explanation for these attitudes is the threat such immigrants pose to the country's cultural and religious homogeneity, to its value system, and to its national identity (Ben-Nun Bloom et al. 2015b; Bansak et al. 2016; Hager & Veit, 2019). Studies conducted in Western democracies indicate a preference for Christian immigrants over Muslims. Typically, the latter are "double disadvantaged" as both immigrants and Muslims (Strabac & Listhaug, 2008; Ben-Nun Bloom et al. 2015b; Bansak et al. 2016; Ponce, 2019; Gorodzeisky & Semyonov, 2019).

In Israel, studies on attitudes of the majority group (Jews) towards immigrants reveal clear in-group favoritism towards Jewish migrants as they are viewed as ethnic migrants returning from the Diaspora (Raijman et al. 2022; Hochman & Raijman, 2022). By contrast, attitudes towards non-Jewish migrants are quite negative because they are perceived as a threat to the dominance of the majority group and the Jewish character of the state (Raijman & Semyonov, 2004; Canetti-Nisim et al. 2008; Raijman, 2010; Gorodzeisky, 2013a).

We assume that Israeli Jews' attitudes towards immigrants of other religions (Christians and Muslims) would be related to the socio-political position of the Arab minority in the country.<sup>4</sup> Previous studies have shown that a large percentage

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<sup>4</sup> The status of Arabs in Israel should be understood within the unique historical circumstances associated with the establishment of the state in 1948 and the nature of the regional and national Israeli-Arab conflict. Currently, Arabs comprise about 20% of the Israeli population. The majority of the Arab population in Israel is Muslim (85.2%), with rather smaller proportions of Christians (7.1%) and Druze (7.5%).

of the Jewish population think that Arab citizens endanger the state because of their struggle to change its Jewish character and their support for the Palestinians (Smootha, 2020). Therefore, many Israeli Jews feel that they pose a threat to the national security of Israel (Canetti-Nisim et al. 2008). Considering these findings and in light of the protracted Israeli-Palestinian conflict that directly influences Jewish-Arab relations in Israel, we expect that anti-Arab sentiments among the Jewish population in the country will affect attitudes towards “hypothetical” Christian or Muslim immigrants.

However, to date, studies measuring attitudes towards the Arab population in Israel refer to them as a homogeneous group without considering religious differences within this population. Virtually no evidence is available that allows us to derive hypotheses regarding differences in Israeli Jews’ attitudes towards Christian and Muslim migrants based on the differences in such attitudes towards Christian and Muslim Arabs. Yet, it is possible to hypothesize that attitudes towards Christian migrants would be more positive than towards Muslims, because Christians are viewed in Israel as Western and explicitly non-Muslim. As such, they are not considered to represent the same level of symbolic threat as Muslims (McGahern, 2011), whom a considerable part of the Jewish majority view as a hostile minority.<sup>5</sup> Stronger opposition to Muslim migrants may also be rooted in the perceived security threats associated with Islamic terrorism in the world in general and in Israel in particular in light of the protracted Palestinian-Israeli conflict (Canetti-Nisim et al. 2008). Given the important role that national security plays in Israel, we can expect Jewish citizens to be relatively more supportive of the admission of Christian migrants than of Muslims.

#### **Perceived cultural threat and migrants’ religiosity**

Some scholars suggest that to better understand the role of migrants’ religion in attitudes towards them we must consider not only the religious affiliation of the migrants (e.g., Muslim, Christian, Jewish) but also their religious behavior or level of religiosity. Public opinion in modern societies is characterized by animosity towards migrants displaying extreme forms of religiosity because religious fundamentalism is viewed as a threat to values such as political liberalism, secularism, democracy, individual freedom, and gender equality (Ben-Nun Bloom et al. 2015b; Helbling & Traunmüller, 2020; Helbling et al. 2022).

Until recently, most studies on public opinion have implicitly assumed that Muslim immigrants are more religious than other religious groups and therefore are perceived as a cultural threat in Western democracies. However, by focusing only on the effect of religion, but not religiosity these studies were not able to assess the extent to which negative sentiments towards Muslims are explained by religious affiliation or religious behavior (Helbling & Traunmüller, 2020).

In order to disentangle the unique effects of migrants’ religion and religiosity, Helbling and associates (2022) considered the extent to which both attributes affect attitudes towards immigrants in five Western European countries characterized by different

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<sup>5</sup> In addition, Muslims are a much larger group in Israeli society compared to Christians. Therefore, they might also be seen as a greater threat than Christians due to their relative size as a group.

citizenship and church-state regimes (Austria, Germany, France, Switzerland, and the UK).<sup>6</sup> Their findings reveal that regardless of the context of their reception, Muslim immigrants are not viewed more negatively than their Christian counterparts. However, the level of religiosity of the migrants is the most important factor explaining anti-immigrant sentiments. Thus, antagonism toward Muslim immigration is the result of the rejection of fundamentalist forms of religiosity that are perceived as a threat to the core values and customs of liberal and modern host-societies. Therefore, the bias against Muslims is driven by a bias against their high level of religiosity, not by the migrants' religious affiliation (Helbling et al. 2022, p. 2).

In the present study, we examine whether and to what extent the findings obtained from democratic liberal societies in Europe apply to Israel, an ethno-national state where the criteria for belonging are specified along an ethno-religious axis and where the national-religious order has become more pronounced than the democratic-liberal criteria (Mautner, 2020).

### **Perceptions of deservingness: migrants' reasons for migration**

Deservingness refers to the ways some groups (but not others) are considered qualified for claiming access to rewards, assistance, and other valuable social goods on the basis of their attributes (Yarris & Castañeda, 2015). Although deservingness has been theorized in other arenas, especially in relation to the actual access of immigrants to welfare rights (Sainsbury, 2006), only in recent years have scholars referred to it as an important dimension in understanding the willingness of individuals to accept immigrants (Verkuyten, 2004; Hercowitz-Amir et al. 2017; Hager & Veit, 2019; von Hermanni & Neumann, 2019; Lawlor & Paquet, 2022).

One important aspect of deservingness suggested in the literature is related to the migrants' reasons for migrating. Previous research shows that people distinguish between forced "involuntary" migrants (asylum seekers and refugees) and "voluntary" (economic) migrants (Verkuyten, 2004; Hochman, 2015; Bansak et al. 2016; Hager & Veit, 2019; Helbling et al. 2022) and attitudes towards the former tend to be more inclusive than towards the latter. The reason for the different attitudes toward both groups is framed in terms of deservingness. The category of asylum seekers confers on them a degree of legitimacy in making claims on receiving societies for the right to enter and be granted rights according to international conventions that define these migrants as vulnerable people "involuntarily" displaced from their homes because of war and political persecution (Yarris & Castañeda, 2015; Czymara & Schmidt-Catran, 2017; De Coninck, 2020; Steele et al. 2023). Some argue that this perception of vulnerability might prompt more inclusiveness towards them, compared with economic migrants who left their country of origin "voluntarily" in search of better economic opportunities. In other words, the criterion for deservingness that differentiates asylum seekers and migrant workers is the concept of vulnerability. It involves the humanitarian issue of protection based on the assumption that the asylum seekers ended up in a situation they did not choose (Jørgensen & Thomsen, 2016).<sup>7</sup>

<sup>6</sup> This study replicated previous findings regarding attitudes towards Muslims in the UK (Helbling & Traummüller, 2020).

<sup>7</sup> The distinction between "force" and "will" is not clear-cut and should be considered as a continuum on which several locations are possible (Yarris & Castañeda, 2015).

In addition, distinctions regarding deservingness are made not only between asylum seekers and economic migrants but also between repatriates and other migrants. Given that Israel is considered to be the homeland of the Jewish people, co-ethnic migrants or repatriates constitute a unique group of immigrants whose Jewish ancestry distinguishes them from other groups (labor migrants, asylum seekers) in both social position and the resources granted to them by the state (Willen, 2012). Repatriates, meaning those returning from the Diaspora, are perceived as more “deserving” migrants than others because of their belonging to the Jewish majority group in the country. As such, the criteria for deservingness are based on shared ancestry, blood ties, and linguistic and cultural homogeneity (Hochman & Raijman, 2022).

We also expect support for the admission of immigrants arriving for different reasons to vary by their religion. According to the in-group favoritism logic described above, we would expect more support for Jewish repatriates than non-Jewish repatriates—Christian or Muslim—as the former are viewed as members of the majority group in Israel. We also expect more support for the admission of Christian repatriates than their Muslim counterparts for two reasons. First, they are viewed as more Western than Muslim immigrants. Second, in the eyes of many Israeli Jews, especially those who are secular, the arrival of Christian migrants under the terms of the Law of Return is a means of securing the numerical advantage of the Jewish majority over the growing number of Arab citizens in the country (Hochman & Raijman, 2022).

In addition, support for the admission of migrants arriving for different reasons is likely to vary according to the level of religiosity of the migrants. However, we also expect the level of religiosity to play the smallest role in supporting the admission of repatriates, because as they are viewed as “deserving” immigrants regardless of their other characteristics. Likewise, we expect religiosity to play a smaller role in the admission of asylum seekers than labor migrants because the former are regarded as vulnerable, involuntary migrants who may prompt Israelis to feel a moral demand to allow them to enter the country (Helbling et al. 2022, p. 2).

#### **The effect of heterogeneity among the Jewish majority: an individual’s level of religiosity**

As mentioned above, ethno-religious identity is one of the most salient markers of in-group favoritism driving anti-immigrant sentiments among the Jewish majority. Nevertheless, the effects of the migrants’ religion, religiosity, and reasons for migration on anti-immigrant attitudes may vary substantially depending on the levels of religiosity of the Jewish majority members themselves. The correlation between an individual’s level of religiosity and attitudes towards migrants has been the focus of a great deal of research with conflicting findings (Benoit 2021). While some studies show that people’s level of religiosity is correlated with positive attitudes towards immigrants, especially in countries where the majority group is Christian (Lubbers et al. 2006), others find it to be associated with a rise in anti-immigrant sentiments, especially towards those who are perceived as out-group members (Scheepers et al. 2002; Gorodzeisky, 2013b).

Research in Israel has established a correlation between low levels of religiosity and support for democracy, tolerance of minorities and migrants, and a predisposition to

resolving the Arab-Israeli conflict. By contrast, higher levels of religiosity are associated with a lack of support for democracy, intolerance of minorities and migrants, and stronger feelings of nationalism (see Ben Rafael, 2008; Bagnio-Moldavsky, 2015). One explanation for this finding is that those who are more religious are concerned about cultural threats, meaning the creation of the situation whereby Jews will no longer be the majority group in the country (Raijman & Semyonov, 2004; Hochman & Raijman, 2022). Thus, in the eyes of religious Jews negative attitudes towards immigrants are defense mechanisms to ensure the Jewish character of the state of Israel.

Based on these findings, we expect people's level of religiosity to interact with the migrants' religion, religiosity, and reasons for migrating, generating different levels of support for their admission to the country. Following the in-group favoritism logic, we posit that, regardless of people's level of religiosity, support for the admission of Jewish immigrants will be unanimous because they are regarded as "legitimate" members of the majority group. By contrast, we expect people's level of religiosity to affect attitudes towards non-Jewish migrants. More religious individuals are expected to more strongly oppose the admission of Christian and Muslim immigrants than their less religious compatriots. More religious individuals are more likely to regard Christian and Muslim immigrants as a threat to the established (religiously influenced) societal and cultural order, and the Jewish character of the state.

Likewise, based on the in-group favoritism logic, we expect the effect of people's level of religiosity to vary with the level of religiosity of the migrants. Accordingly, religious people are expected to support the admission of religious migrants but may oppose the arrival of secular and non-observant immigrants. By contrast, secular people would be more concerned about the arrival of very religious migrants because they might be perceived as a threat to the society's liberal and democratic values.

Finally, we expect people's level of religiosity to interact with the reasons for migration. We expect religious people to be more opposed to the admission of asylum seekers and labor migrants (especially those with Muslim affiliations) than their secular counterparts. By contrast, we do not expect the levels of support for the admission of Jewish repatriates to vary regardless of people's level of religiosity because Jewish citizens generally regard repatriates as legitimate migrants returning to their homeland (in-group favoritism). Finally, we expect secular people to be more supportive than their religious counterparts of the admission of non-Jewish repatriates (especially Christians).

Table 1 provides an overview of our hypotheses related to the impact of the migrants' religion, religiosity, and reasons for migration on supporting or opposing admission to Israel as well as hypotheses related to the ways in which people's level of religiosity interacts with these migrants' characteristics. We focus on three types of effects: (1) the main effects of the migrants' religion (H1a), the migrants' religiosity (H1b) and the reasons for the migration (H2a); (2) two-way interaction effects between the migrants' religion and religiosity (H1c), the reasons for the migration and the migrants' religion (H2b), and the reasons for the migration and religiosity (H2c); and (3) cross-level interactions between the respondents' level of religiosity and the migrants' religion (H3a), the respondents' level of religiosity and the migrants' religiosity (H3b), the respondents' level of religiosity, the reason for the migration, and migrants' religion (H3c).



**Table 1** Overview of hypotheses

Hypothesis	Main effect of immigrants' characteristics	2-way interaction of immigrants' characteristics
<b>Immigrants' religion and religiosity</b>		
H1a	<b>Religion</b> (Jews preferred over non-Jews) (Christian preferred over Muslims) (Fig. 1a)	
H1b	<b>Religiosity</b> (extremely religious are less welcome than moderately religious and secular) (Fig. 1b)	
H1c		<b>Religion varies with religiosity</b> (specifically: object to extremely religious Muslims) (Fig. 1c)
<b>Immigrants' reasons for migration and religion, religiosity</b>		
H2a	<b>Reasons for migration</b> (repatriates preferred over asylum seekers, asylum seekers preferred over labor migrants) (Fig. 2a)	
H2b		<b>Reasons for migration and religion</b> (Jewish repatriates are preferred over non-Jewish repatriates) (Christian repatriates preferred over Muslim repatriates) (Fig. 2b)
H2c		<b>Reasons for migration and religiosity</b> Acceptance of Jewish repatriates is universal-viewed as members of the in-group The effect of religiosity on asylum seekers is weaker than on labor migrants (Fig. 2c)
<b>Respondents' religiosity and immigrants' religion, religiosity</b>		
H3a		<b>Cross-level-interaction of immigrants' characteristics with respondents' characteristics</b> <b>Religiosity of respondents and religion of immigrants:</b> Acceptance of Jews is universal-viewed as members of the in-group Religious <i>respondents</i> are more concerned about Christian and Muslim immigrants than secular religious <i>respondents</i> with opposition to Muslims stronger than to Christians (Fig. 3a)
H3b		<b>Religiosity of respondents and religiosity of immigrants:</b> Religious <i>respondents</i> are more concerned about secular immigrants (and vice versa) (Fig. 3b)
<b>Respondents' religiosity and immigrants' reason for migration</b>		
H3c		<b>Triple interaction–Religiosity of respondents and immigrants' religion and reasons for migration:</b> Acceptance of Jewish repatriates is universal–Religious respondents oppose entrance of non-Jewish repatriates (especially Muslims) more than secular respondents–Religious respondents oppose entrance of asylum seekers and labor migrants to a relatively greater degree than secular respondents. Opposition to labor migrants stronger than to asylum seekers–Preference for Christians over Muslims (Fig. 3c)

**Methodology**

**Factorial survey**

This study is a part of the wider research project in which we used a factorial survey experiment (Auspurg & Hinz, 2014) to learn about the relevance of various migrants’ attributes on attitudes towards them. The survey experiment assessed six characteristics of hypothetical migrants: gender (man/woman); continent of origin (Asia/Africa/Europe); education (with an academic education/without an academic education); religion (Jewish/Muslim/Christian), religiosity level (secular/somewhat religious/extremely religious); and reason for migration (repatriate/labor migrant/asylum seeker) (see Supplemental Table A1 for an overview of the dimensions we used and their levels).<sup>8</sup> We applied a fractional sample of 252 vignettes out of the vignette universe (see Supplemental Table A2 for the orthogonality of the vignette’s dimensions and D-efficiency). The 252 vignettes from the fractionalized sample were randomly distributed over 42 decks of 6 vignettes each. The decks were randomly assigned to respondents. A sample vignette with a scale to measure the degree of willingness to grant admission to Israel reads as follows:

<b>A man from Africa with an academic education, who is an extremely religious Muslim, fleeing from war or political persecution and seeking refuge in Israel.</b>										
To what extent do you agree or disagree that Israel should allow him to come and live here?										
Disagree strongly										Agree Strongly
0	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

**Sample**

The research project is based on a survey conducted by Geocartography, a leading Israeli company specializing in public opinion research in Israel. Unlike most of the previous studies on attitudes towards migrants using a factorial survey that collected data using online samples of self-registered volunteers, we collected data from a representative sample of the national population (aged 21–70). Thus, our research design led not only to a high level of internal validity of the research but also to a quite high level of external validity of the results.

The survey was based on a multi-stage stratified random sampling with a quasi-random selection of residential units. The response rate was 51% (see Supplemental Table A3 for sampling and survey details). The final data set included 600 participants responding to the Hebrew questionnaire and 308 participants responding to the Arabic version. Given the present study’s focus on the attitudes of Israel’s Jewish population, we analyzed the vignette evaluations of the 600 respondents ( $N=3,595$  for the admission scale).<sup>9</sup> The overall mean evaluation of all 3,595 vignettes for the dependent variable of support for the admission of immigrants is 6.1 out of 11 (s.d.=3.4). The characteristics of the sample are presented in Supplemental Table A4.

<sup>8</sup> Please note that there were two illogical combinations: a Jew coming to Israel either as a migrant worker or as an asylum seeker. This is because Jews are entitled to come under the Law of Return. Thus, the status of ‘repatriate’ was necessarily correlated with being Jewish.

<sup>9</sup> Detailed checks confirmed the random assignment of decks to the participants. Each of the 252 vignettes was evaluated a minimum of 11 times and a maximum of 17 times. A correlation matrix of the vignette dimensions in the realized sample indicated coefficients close to zero – with the exception of the reason for migration and religion ( $r=.398$ ). These two dimensions were correlated by design.

### Statistical models

In order to estimate the net effects of the migrants' religion, religiosity, and reasons for migration and the respondents' level of religiosity on attitudes towards immigrants, we used linear regression models with cluster-robust standard errors to account for the nested structure of the vignettes within respondents (see Cameron & Miller, 2015). The dependent variable in all models is *support for admission* to Israel measured on an 11-point scale. Higher values on the scale indicate a greater willingness to grant admission to Israel to the potential immigrants described in the vignettes. Note that we included all vignette variables (described above), and three respondents' characteristics [gender (female = 1), age (in years), formal schooling (in years) for learning about basic respondent-level differences.<sup>10</sup>

In order to keep the interpretation of results comprehensible and focused on the proposed group differences, we calculated predicted values with their 95% confidence intervals for all combinations of the characteristics of interest of the respondents and the vignettes. The predicted values presented in the figures in the findings are based on regression estimates and depict the predicted scores of the dependent variable "support for admission" for different characteristics of the migrants, the interactions of these characteristics and some cross-level interactions with the respondents' religiosity. Regression models are presented in Supplemental Tables A5.1, A5.2 and A5.3. Our findings in the paper itself include only graphs. Where necessary, we report on the statistical significance of the coefficients in the footnotes.

### Findings

#### *In-group favoritism, perceived threats and migrants' religion and religiosity*

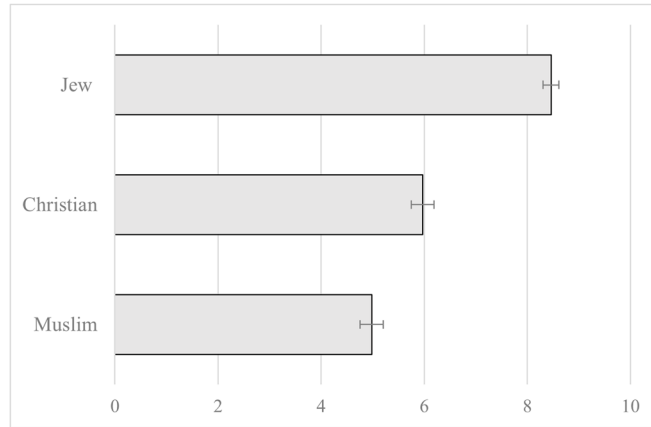
Figure 1a displays the predicted values for support for the admission of migrants of different religions to Israel. In line with our expectations (H1a), Israeli Jews are more likely to support the admission of Jewish immigrants with whom they share a religious identification (8.5) and to be reluctant to support immigrants from other religions: Christians (6.0) and especially Muslims (5.0). As expected, they are more supportive of admitting Christians than Muslims. These findings corroborate that, in Israel, as in other receiving societies, the religious identity of migrant groups plays a very important role in influencing attitudes towards them.

In Fig. 1b, we present the predicted values for support for the admission of immigrants with different levels of religiosity (H1b). There is less support for admitting extremely religious immigrants (5.9) than their somewhat religious (6.2) or secular counterparts (6.3). However, the differences in the attitudes towards migrants of different levels of religiosity are rather small compared to the differences we described for immigrants of different religions.<sup>11</sup> These results suggest that the religious affiliation of the migrants

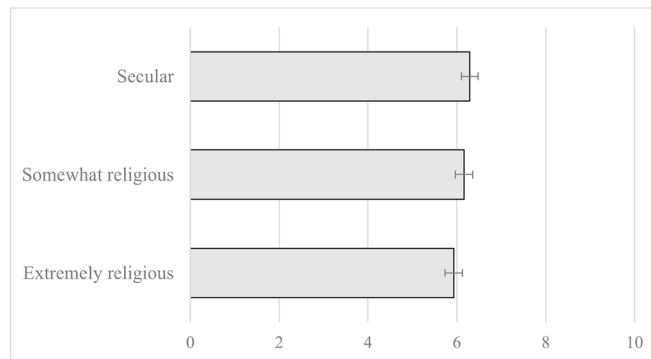
<sup>10</sup> For theoretical reasons we focused on the effect of three characteristics of the migrants. However, it should be noted that the effects of the immigrant's gender, education, and continent of origin on attitudes toward admission were relatively moderate compared to the strong impact of religion and reason for migration (see Supplemental Tables A5.1, A5.2, and A5.3).

<sup>11</sup> Differences in the coefficients for the extremely religious and the secular (the omitted category) are statistically significant (see Supplemental Table A5.1, model A).

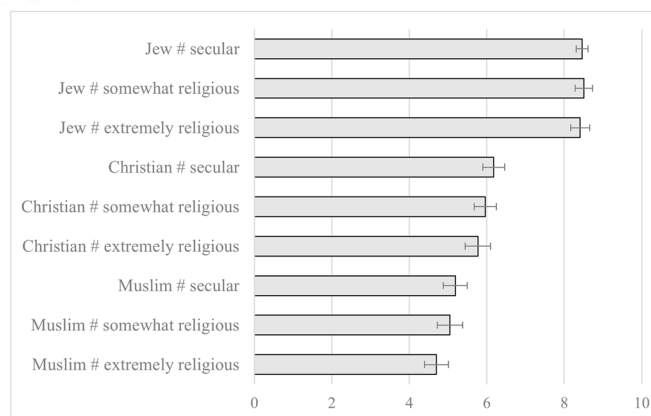
**a: Predicted values (with 95% CI) of support for admitting migrants to Israel (0 – highest level of disagreement; 10: highest level of agreement) by religion of migrants \***



**b: Predicted values (with 95% CI) of support for admitting migrants to Israel (0 – highest level of disagreement; 10: highest level of agreement) by religiosity of migrants \***



**c: Predicted values (with 95% CI) of support for admitting migrants to Israel (0 – highest level of disagreement; 10: highest level of agreement) by religion and religiosity\***



**Fig. 1** Figures 1a, 1b, and 1c: Admission of migrants to Israel by their religion and religiosity

\* see supplemental Table A5.1, Models A and B

but not their level of religiosity is the main cue through which Israeli Jews evaluate migrants' entitlement for entrance to Israel.

Figure 1c shows the predicted values of the interaction between the religion of the migrants and their religiosity in support for admitting immigrants to Israel, as stated in H1c. The data clearly show that there is no interaction between the religion of the migrants and their religiosity in affecting such support. Predicted values regarding support for the admission of Jewish migrants are very high regardless of the migrants' level of religiosity. Likewise, religiosity does not play a significant role in the case of Christian and Muslim immigrants, as predicted values for admission do not differ for different levels of migrants' religiosity. Although we expected stronger exclusionary attitudes for the admission of extremely religious Muslims, the data clearly show that the effect of religiosity is rather negligible among this group too.<sup>12</sup> Thus, the support for the admission of different groups of migrants is shaped by their religion, not by their level of religiosity.

### Perceptions of deservingness and the reasons for migration

Figure 2a illustrates the effect of the reasons for the migration of newcomers on the respondents' attitudes towards them. In line with our theoretical expectations (H2a), the predicted scores reveal a clear difference between attitudes towards the admission of repatriates (6.9) and the two other groups, as the former are viewed as legitimate migrants covered by the Law of Return. However, contrary to our expectations, differences in the predicted scores for asylum seekers (involuntary migrants) and labor migrants (voluntary migrants) are rather small: 5.6 and 5.3, respectively.<sup>13</sup> It seems that, contrary to the findings in liberal democracies (e.g., Bansak et al. 2016) Israelis regard asylum seekers fleeing from war as only slightly more deserving of admission to Israel than their labor migrant counterparts.

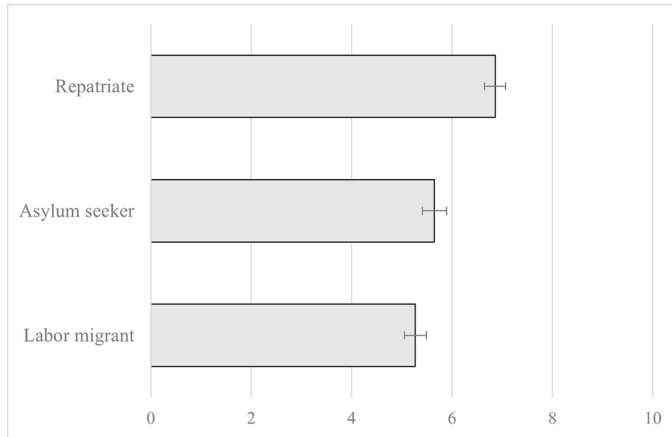
An interesting question is whether attitudes toward migrants with different reasons for migration differ according to the religion of the migrants. Figure 2b displays the predicted scores based on the interaction between the reasons for migration and religion. As expected, a "migrant hierarchy" based on religion (Jewish > Christian > Muslim) is evident within each category of the reasons for migration (H2b). In the case of the repatriate category, support for admission is stronger for those of Jewish origin (9.2) than for those of non-Jewish origin—Christian (6.7) or Muslim (5.7). Likewise, support for the admission of Christian asylum seekers is stronger than for their Muslim counterparts (5.4 and 4.6, respectively) and support for the admission of Christian labor migrants is stronger than for their Muslim counterparts (5.2 and 4.0, respectively). In other words, both the migrants' reasons for migrating and their religion matter for explaining support for admission to Israel.

Finally, we also expected the effect of the reasons for migration to vary according to the religiosity of the migrant. Figure 2c presents the predicted scores for allowing the

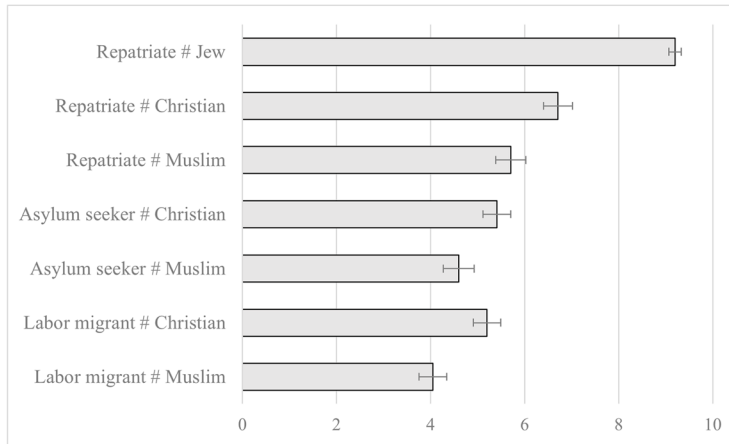
<sup>12</sup> Although there is a tendency for extremely religious Muslims to be rejected more than their Christian counterparts (as compared to secular immigrants), the differences in the coefficients are small and statistically not significant (see Supplemental Table A5.1, model A).

<sup>13</sup> We checked the difference in the coefficients between labor migrants and asylum seekers (the omitted category) is small but statistically significant ( $b = -0.363$  (0.141)). Data available upon request.

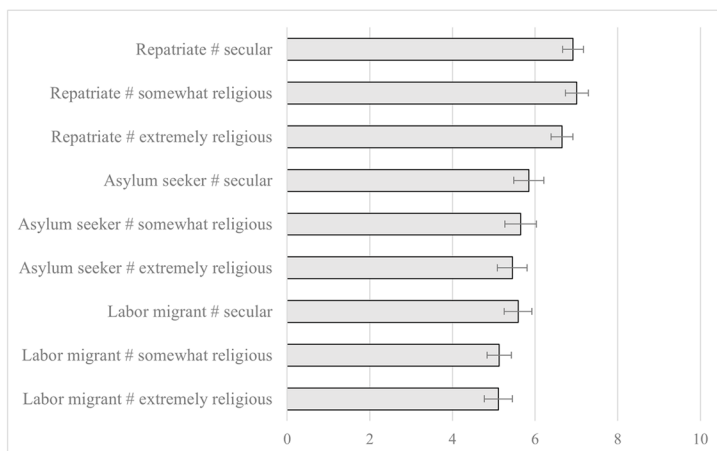
**a: Predicted values (with 95% CI) of support for admitting migrants to Israel by reasons for migration \***



**b: Predicted values (with 95% CI) of support for admitting migrants to Israel by reasons for migration and religion \***



**c: Predicted values (with 95% CI) of support for admitting migrants to Israel by reasons for migration and religiosity\***



**Fig. 2** Figures 2a, 2b, and 2c: Admission of migrants to Israel by reason of migration, religion and religiosity

\* see supplemental Table A5.1, Models A, C, and D

entrance of immigrants based on the interaction between the reasons for migration and religiosity.

As H2c posited, there is an overall consensus among Israeli Jews regarding the admission of repatriates regardless of the migrants' levels of religiosity. This finding confirms that the religiosity of the migrants does not play any role in Jewish respondents' willingness to grant admission to Jewish repatriates to the country.

In the case of non-Jewish migrants, we expected that labor migrants and asylum seekers who are less religious would be more likely to be preferred over their religious counterparts. However, we do not see much variance in the predicted values for supporting the entrance of asylum seekers and labor migrants based on their levels of religiosity, as their predicted scores ranged between 5.1 and 5.8 points. Although there is a slight preference for secular migrants over their extremely religious counterparts, the coefficients of the interaction terms between the level of religiosity and the reason for migration (either labor migrants or asylum seekers) are not statistically significant (see Supplemental Table A5.1, model D). Thus, Hypothesis 2c was rejected.

#### **The role of the respondents' religiosity**

We then considered the question of how people's level of religiosity interacts with the migrants' characteristics in their views towards them.<sup>14</sup> To do so we grouped the respondents into three categories of religiosity: secular, traditional, and orthodox.

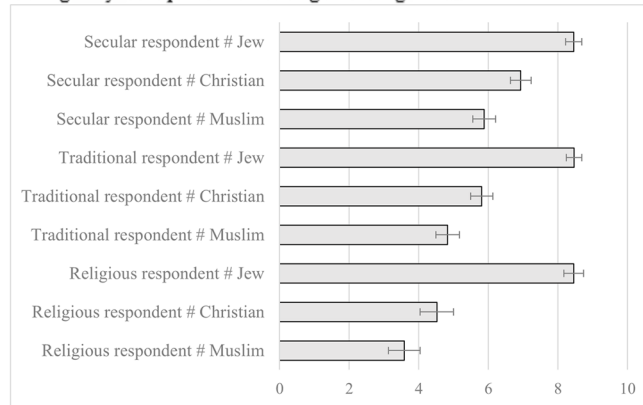
Figure 3a presents the predicted values of attitudes toward allowing the entrance of immigrants to Israel, focusing on the interaction between the religiosity of the respondents and the migrants' religion. As H3a posited, there are no differences in the predicted scores of respondents with different levels of religiosity in their support for the admission of Jewish migrants (8.5). By contrast, the level of religiosity of the respondents clearly impacts their attitudes towards the admission of immigrants of other religions. Secular respondents have significantly more positive attitudes toward the admission of Christians and Muslims (6.9 and 5.9, respectively) than their Orthodox counterparts (4.5 and 3.6, respectively for Christian and Muslim migrants).

Figure 3b displays the predicted values for allowing admission to the country based on the interaction between the religiosity of the respondents and the religiosity of the migrants. Overall, secular Jews have more positive attitudes than their religious counterparts about admitting migrants of any type of religious behavior. However, contrary to H3B, there is no interaction effect between the religiosity of the respondents and the religiosity of the migrants.<sup>15</sup>

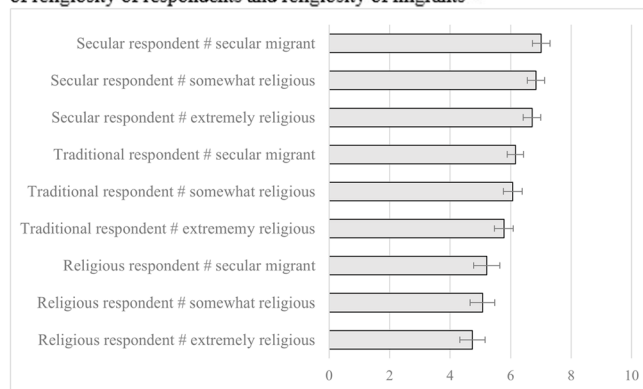
<sup>14</sup> Other control variables in the model had more moderate effects than level of religiosity. As expected, highly educated respondents and women were more supportive of the admission of immigrants but older respondents tended to oppose the admission of immigrants (see the coefficients in Models A and B in Supplemental Table A5.2 and Model A in Supplemental Table A5.3).

<sup>15</sup> No significant differences in the coefficients; see Model B in Supplemental Table A5.2.

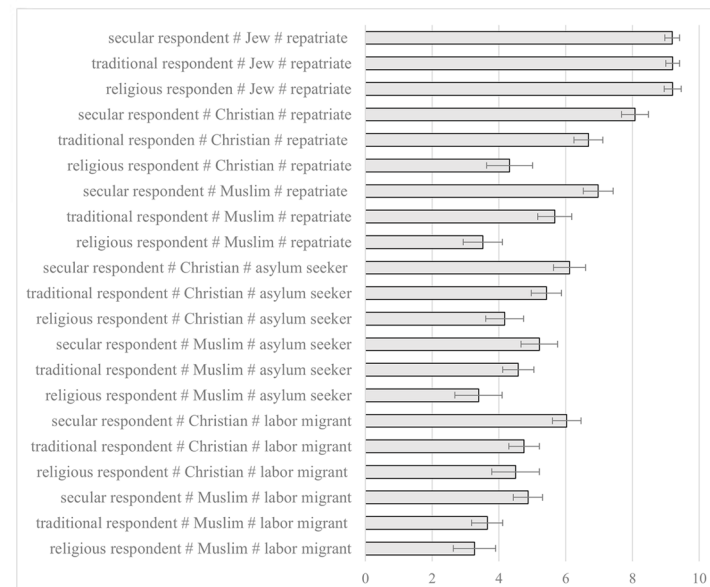
**a: Predicted values (with 95% CI) of support for admitting migrants to Israel by level of religiosity of respondents and religion of migrants \***



**b: Predicted values (with 95% CI) of support for admitting migrants to Israel by level of religiosity of respondents and religiosity of migrants \***



**c: Predicted values (with 95% CI) of support for admitting migrants to Israel by level of religiosity of respondents, and reasons for migration and religion of the migrants**



**Fig. 3** Figures 3a, 3b, and 3c: Admission of migrants to Israel by religiosity of respondents and migrants' religion, religiosity, reasons of migration

\* see supplemental Table 5.2, Models A and B



Figure 3c displays the predicted values for admitting migrants based on the interaction between the religiosity of the respondents and the reasons for migration and the religion of the migrants.

As H3c posited, regardless of the religiosity of the respondents, support for the admission of Jewish repatriates is universal (9.2). Differences in the strength of support for the admission of non-Jewish repatriates varies by the level of religiosity of the respondents, with secular respondents expressing the strongest support for the admission of Christian and Muslim repatriates (8.1 and 7.0, respectively) compared to their Orthodox counterparts (4.3 and 3.5, respectively).

In general, attitudes towards asylum seekers and labor migrants differ based on the respondents' level of religiosity. The stronger the level of religiosity of the respondents, the less support they express for the admission of either migrant group, whether Christian or Muslim. Secular respondents are equally supportive of the admission of both groups (6.1 and 6.0, for Christian asylum seekers and labor migrants, respectively). Support for Muslim migrants is somewhat lower: 5.2 and 4.9 for asylum seekers and labor migrants, respectively. However, contrary to H3c's expectations, the gaps in the predicted scores reflecting support for the admission of asylum seekers (involuntary migrants) and labor migrants (voluntary migrants) are very small within each category of the religiosity of the respondents and the religion of the migrants.

## Discussion

Who are the immigrants that Israeli Jews prefer? Our findings show that, consistent with Israel's ethnocentric immigration policy, Israeli Jews do not evaluate all immigrant groups equally. Preferences for specific groups are primarily structured along two main attributes: religion and reasons for migration. In line with our expectations, Jewish respondents clearly display different attitudes towards the admission of immigrants of other religions. The hypothetical immigrants with Islamic backgrounds constituted the least welcome group even if they were entitled to come to Israel under the terms of the Law of Return because they were coming with a Jewish spouse. Thus, it is possible that respondents are applying the images and perceptions of local Muslims to the hypothetical Muslim migrants presented in the vignettes.

Despite the overall animosity towards non-Jewish migrants, Christians incurred less of a penalty than Muslims. One explanation might be that Christian Arabs in Israel are regarded as having more Western characteristics than their Muslim counterparts. In addition, Israeli Jews are less likely to regard them as posing the same threats to their culture and safety as Muslim Arabs (McGahern, 2011).

Our findings show that attitudes towards the admission of immigrants to Israel are mainly influenced by the migrants' religious identity, not by their level of religiosity. In other words, Jews' concerns about the presence of potential non-Jewish immigrants are clearly associated with fears about the effect of immigrants of other religions on the culture of the country and less about fundamentalist forms of religiosity. Thus, our findings differ somewhat from those of studies conducted in liberal democracies in Europe.

There, it was the immigrants' level of religiosity more than their nominal faith that affected Europeans' attitudes towards them (Helbling et al. 2022).

Reasons for migration is indeed a core attribute affecting the willingness to support the admission of migrants to Israel, with Jewish repatriates being the most preferred group. However, contrary to expectations, Israeli Jews regard asylum seekers (involuntary migrants) fleeing from war as only slightly more deserving of admission to Israel than their labor migrant counterparts (voluntary migrants). This result suggests that, unlike citizens in European liberal democracies who prefer forced migrants over economic migrants (e.g., Bansak et al. 2016), Israeli Jews are not sensitive to humanitarian concerns about the legitimacy of the asylum request of forced migrants in Israel. This finding is not surprising in light of the highly exclusionary policy towards asylum seekers in Israel, as they are labeled "infiltrators" by the state and are portrayed as bogus refugees looking for economic opportunities rather than fleeing danger or political persecution in their countries of origin (Hochman & Hercowitz-Amir, 2017). By framing asylum seekers in negative ways, political elites activate prejudice towards them and influence public attitudes towards these migrants (Czymara, 2020).

The impact of the immigrants' attributes on attitudes varies based on the level of religiosity of the Jewish population.<sup>16</sup> As expected, regardless of the level of religiosity of the respondents, support for the admission of Jews is very strong, as they are viewed as part of the in-group. However, the religiosity of the respondents matters in the case of attitudes towards the admission of non-Jews. Support is stronger in the case of secular respondents and much weaker among their more religious counterparts. The same pattern is evident with regard to the admission of non-Jewish repatriates, asylum seekers, and labor migrants. Here again, religious individuals are more likely than their secular counterparts to regard out-group populations as a threat to the religious, national, and cultural homogeneity of the state and the national identity of the majority.

Overall, similar to studies conducted in America and Europe, our findings highlight the ways in which in-group favoritism driven by a strong ethno-religious identity strengthens the positive evaluation and inclusion of in-group populations and negative evaluations and exclusion of out-group populations who are perceived as outsiders and therefore not worthy of inclusion in the host society (Ben-Nun Bloom et al. 2015b; Hiers et al. 2017). Israel differs from most other Western societies in two relevant factors associated with public opinion towards immigrants. First, it is a state whose security has been constantly threatened by the protracted conflict with Arab neighboring countries. As Hiers and colleagues (2017) argued, in countries where natives feel that their national sovereignty and territory are threatened, (geopolitical threat) they tend to be more hostile towards immigrants, especially towards those who do not share the same ancestry and ethnicity as the majority group. Second, as a self-declared Jewish state, in which the separation between religion and state is relatively blurred, religion plays a central role in the definition of

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<sup>16</sup> We are aware that other explanatory factors could also be relevant in explaining attitudes towards migrants such as individuals' psychological predispositions and socialization early in life. Although we did not collect information about these variables, they deserve inclusion in future studies.

“who deserves” to be included in the society and polity (Hochman & Raijman, 2022). Although religion plays a central role in the public sphere in many Western countries “few democracies go as far as the Israeli state to accommodate religious fundamentalism in the public domain” (Bagno-Moldavski, 2015, p. 515). Therefore, in the case of Israel in-group favoritism based on ethnic and religious terms, rather than in civic terms, has strong emotional resonance with the population. Immigrants who do not belong to the majority are more frequently seen as outsiders in the context of the nation state.

Note, however, that contrary to our expectations and the results of research conducted in Europe, we did not find evidence of in-group favoritism or out-group derogation in the case of level of religiosity. Many studies have explained the antagonism towards Muslim and Christian immigrants in Europe based on the rejection of fundamentalist forms of religiosity that threaten the core values of liberal societies, not on their religion per se. In contrast, in Israel attitudes towards migrants of different levels of religiosity, whether Jewish or non-Jewish, did not vary based on their level of religiosity. This difference suggests that religious identity itself affects attitudes towards immigrants beyond their religious behavior, a finding that deserves further research.

Summarizing, our study confirms the still pronounced role of ethno-national-religious affiliation as a social boundary in Israel. Unlike some Western European countries that are witnessing a trend toward the de-ethnicization of migration policies and citizenship (Joppke & Morawska, 2003), in Israel ethno-religious origin still remains the main marker for inclusion in the society. The ethno-religious nature of the minority-majority social boundary is not only highly institutionalized in different domains at the macro-level of Israeli society but, as our results indicate, is also reflected at the micro-level, in the attitudes of the public towards different migrant groups. Indeed, when a nation is defined in ethnic and religious terms rather than on civic ones, in-group favoritism becomes a stronger and leading source for exclusion of non-ethnic migrants. Thus, Jewish exclusivism with its unique correspondence of religion and ethnicity makes the nation inaccessible to outsiders thus hindering prospects for inclusion of non-ethnic migrants into the Israeli society.

## Supplementary Information

The online version contains supplementary material available at <https://doi.org/10.1186/s40878-024-00387-y>.

Supplementary Material 1.

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## Authors' contributions

(1) RR contributed to research design, questionnaire development, data collection and analysis, conceptualization and design of paper, and writing (2) AG contributed to research design, questionnaire development, data collection and analysis, revised the first draft of the manuscript and made substantial input into the writing of the article, (3) MS contributed to research design, questionnaire development, data collection and analysis, revised the first draft of the manuscript and made substantial input into the writing of the article, (4) TH contributed substantially to the research design, questionnaire design, data collection, data validation, data analysis, revised the first draft of the manuscript and made substantial input into the writing of the article. All authors read and approved the final manuscript.

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**Availability of data and materials**

The dataset used during the current study is available from the corresponding author on reasonable request.

**Declarations****Ethics approval and consent to participate**

The questionnaire for this study was approved by the Human Research Ethics committee of the University of Haifa (Ethics approval number: 371/19).

**Competing interests**

We have no financial or non-financial competing interests to declare.

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