Relations Between the Israel Police and Ethiopian Israelis: A Comparative Study with Police-minority Relations Worldwide

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Abstract

This study examines the complex relationship between the Israel Police and the Ethiopian-Israeli community, comparing it to police-minority relations in other countries. The research is based on historical, sociological, and psychological analysis of the relationship's development from the 1980s to the present. It explores the historical roots of existing tensions, the impacts of institutional and personal racism, and the unique challenges faced by the Ethiopian-Israeli community in the context of law enforcement. Through international comparison, the study identifies similar and different patterns in police-minority relations across countries, analyzing how global experience can contribute to solving challenges in Israel. It emphasizes the uniqueness of the Israeli case, particularly the complexity arising from the shared Jewish identity of the Ethiopian community and the majority in Israel. Finally, the study proposes a comprehensive set of solutions to improve relations between the police and the Ethiopian-Israeli community, emphasizing the utilization of the community's uniqueness as a national asset.

Keywords: Israel Studies, Ethiopian-Israelis, Israeli Police, Police-Minority Relations.

1. Introduction

The relationship between the Israel Police and the Ethiopian-Israeli community represents a complex and sensitive issue, reflecting broader challenges of integration and inclusion in Israeli society. This research seeks to examine this relationship in depth, comparing it to relations between police forces and minority communities in other countries worldwide.

The study is based on a historical, sociological, and psychological analysis of the development of relations between the Israel Police and the Ethiopian community, from the beginning of immigration in the 1980s to the present day. It examines the historical roots of existing tensions, the effects of institutional and personal racism, and the unique challenges facing the Ethiopian-Israeli community in the context of law enforcement.

Through international comparison, the research identifies similar and different patterns in police-minority relations in various countries, analyzing how global experience can contribute to solving challenges in Israel. At the same time, it emphasizes the uniqueness of the Israeli case, particularly the complexity arising from the shared Jewish identity of the Ethiopian community and the majority in Israel.

Finally, the study proposes a comprehensive set of solutions to improve relations between the police and the Ethiopian-Israeli community, emphasizing the utilization of the

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community's uniqueness as a national asset. The aim of the research is not only to offer practical solutions but also to contribute to the public and academic discourse on integration, identity, and law enforcement in a multicultural society.

2. Background of Ethiopian Israelis

The Ethiopian-Israeli community forms a unique and significant part of Israel's social and cultural mosaic. The roots of this community are deeply embedded in Jewish history, with a tradition dating back to the 4th century CE. According to (Corinaldi, 1998), Ethiopian Jewry, also known as "Beta Israel," was formed when community members refused to convert to Christianity when the Kingdom of Aksum adopted Christianity as the state religion. For centuries, the community maintained its unique Jewish identity in Ethiopia, preserving ancient traditions and customs, often under conditions of persecution and isolation.

The mass immigration of Ethiopian (Spector 2005) Jews to Israel represents a dramatic chapter in the history of the Jewish people and the state. It occurred mainly in two major waves: "Operation Moses" in 1984 and "Operation Solomon" in 1991. Operation Moses, which took place in secrecy, brought about 8,000 Jews from Ethiopia to Israel via Sudan, after years of persecution and severe economic distress under the Mengistu regime. Operation Solomon, which occurred seven years later against the backdrop of the Ethiopian coup, was even more dramatic. In just 36 hours, about 14,000 Jews from Ethiopia were airlifted to Israel in an emergency operation, using the largest transport planes of the Air Force. These operations, which received enormous media and cultural resonance, symbolized for many the realization of the Zionist vision of the ingathering of exiles and global Jewish solidarity.

However, the sharp transition from traditional village life in Ethiopia to life in a dynamic Western Israeli society created complex challenges of absorption and integration. The vast gap between the traditional way of life in Ethiopian villages and the demanding Israeli reality led to severe adjustment difficulties in the areas of employment, education, and housing. Many immigrants struggled to integrate into the modern labor market and had to settle for low-wage and low-status jobs (Schwartz & Galily, 2016). In the education system, immigrant children encountered significant learning gaps and language difficulties, which hindered their full integration.

Despite the progress made in recent decades, the Ethiopian-Israeli community still faces significant gaps in education, employment, and housing compared to the general population. Statistical data indicate higher poverty rates, underrepresentation in senior positions and higher education, and widespread feelings of discrimination and marginalization. According to data from the Central Bureau of Statistics from 2021, the poverty rate among Ethiopian families stands at about 23%, compared to about 18% in the general population. In the field of employment, despite significant improvement, there is still a gap in average wages: the average monthly salary of Ethiopian workers stands at about 8,000 NIS, compared to about 11,000 NIS in the general population.

The cultural identity of Ethiopian Israelis is characterized by a constant tension between preserving Ethiopian heritage and tradition and the desire to integrate into Israeli society. Many first and second-generation members experience difficulties adapting to the norms and values of the absorbing society, sometimes creating intergenerational conflicts and feelings of alienation. Studies indicate that young Ethiopian Israelis develop a hybrid identity, combining elements from Ethiopian and Israeli culture. This identity is characterized by duality: on one hand, pride in Ethiopian heritage and a desire to preserve customs and traditions; on the other hand, an aspiration to integrate into Israeli society and adopt the Western lifestyle.

Despite progress in many areas, the Ethiopian-Israeli community still faces manifestations of racism and discrimination in everyday life. Studies point to the existence of prejudices and stereotypical perceptions towards Ethiopians among parts of Israeli society, affecting life opportunities and the sense of belonging of community members. A survey conducted by the Adva Center in 2020 found that 41% of Ethiopians reported experiencing discrimination in the past year, compared to 13% in the general population (Kama & Ginzburg, 2018). The main areas of discrimination included employment, public services, and the education system.

3. Relations between Israel Police and Ethiopian Israelis: Historical development and current trends

The relationship between the Israel Police and the Ethiopian-Israeli community represents a complex and sensitive issue, reflecting broader challenges of integration and inclusion in Israeli society. This relationship has developed and changed over the years, from the beginning of Ethiopian Jewish immigration to Israel to the present day, influenced by various social, cultural, and institutional factors.

With the arrival of Ethiopian Jews in Israel during Operations Moses (1984) and Solomon (1991), significant challenges began to arise in the community's relationship with law enforcement authorities. During this period, the encounter between the immigrants and the police was mainly characterized by mutual cultural misunderstanding and communication difficulties. Many immigrants, coming from a rural and traditional background, struggled to understand the role of the police in a modern Western society. Studies from that period indicate low crime reporting rates among immigrants, partly due to lack of trust in the system and partly due to unfamiliarity with reporting procedures (Shabtay, 1999).

In the decade following the large-scale immigration, disturbing patterns began to emerge in police-community relations. Studies from this period point to growing feelings of discrimination and over-policing among young Ethiopian Israelis. For example, a 1997 survey found that 62% of young Ethiopian Israelis reported experiencing unjustified police stops or searches, compared to 28% among non-Ethiopian youth (Ben-David, 1999). Concurrently, reports of police violence against community members began to appear, contributing to deepening distrust and creating a narrative of hostility from the system.

A significant turning point in relations between the police and the Ethiopian-Israeli community was the 2006 protests in Kiryat Malachi. These demonstrations, which erupted following allegations of police violence against a young Ethiopian man, marked the beginning of organized and ongoing protests against perceived discriminatory treatment by the police. These events brought increased public attention to the issue and led to a series of commitments from the police to improve relations.

In response to protests and public criticism, the Israel Police began to take steps to improve relations. These included increasing the recruitment of Ethiopian police officers, providing training on cultural sensitivity, and establishing forums for dialogue with community leaders. However, the impact of these measures was limited, as evidenced by data on continued disparities in arrest and detention rates.

The year 2015 marks another breaking point in relations between the police and the Ethiopian-Israeli community. The release of a video documenting police violence against soldier Damas Pakada ignited a wave of widespread protests, culminating in mass demonstrations in Tel Aviv and Jerusalem. These protests exposed the depth of the crisis and the feelings of frustration and anger that had accumulated over years. Following the protests, an inter-ministerial committee

was established to combat racism against Ethiopians, and the police announced a series of additional measures to improve relations.

Despite declared efforts, statistical data from recent years continue to indicate significant gaps. According to Israel Prison Service data (2022), the rate of Ethiopian prisoners stands at about 3.5% of all inmates, while their share in the general population is about 1.7%. Israel Police data (2021) show that the arrest rate of young Ethiopian Israelis aged 18-25 is 2.5 times higher than their relative share in the population.

Regarding types of offenses, recent data indicate an overrepresentation of Ethiopians in violent and property crimes. According to a report by the Ministry of Public Security (2020), 18% of suspects in violent crimes and 15% of suspects in property crimes were of Ethiopian origin, rates significantly higher than their share in the population.

4. Police-minority relations worldwide: Historical development and causes of distrust

The relationship between police forces and minority communities around the world represents a complex global challenge, reflecting deep historical, social, and political processes. Throughout history, police in many countries have evolved not only as law enforcement bodies but also as tools for maintaining the existing social order, which often reflected and preserved structural inequality. This legacy continues to influence relations between police and minority communities today, creating ongoing challenges and raising fundamental questions about the role of police in modern democratic society.

The historical development of police-minority relations can be divided into several key periods.

Colonial and Slavery Era (16th to 19th centuries): The first roots of tension were formed. For example, in the United States, the first policing forces in the southern states developed from "slave patrols," whose role was to enforce the slavery system. In South Africa, the police served as a central tool in maintaining the colonial order and later the apartheid regime. This legacy created a basis of deep distrust between minority communities and the police.

Segregation and Institutionalized Discrimination Era (late 19th to mid-20th century): Police in many countries served as a tool to enforce racial segregation laws and discrimination. In the United States, for instance, police enforced Jim Crow laws in the South, and in South Africa, the apartheid laws. In Australia, the police were involved in the "Stolen Generations" policy, which included separating Aboriginal children from their families. These actions deepened the distrust and hostility between minority communities and the police.

Civil Rights Struggles Era (1950s to 1970s): This period was crucial in police-minority relations. In the United States, violent confrontations between police and black protesters, such as in the Selma events of 1965, reinforced the perception of police as an oppressive body in the eyes of the African-American community. In Britain, the Brixton riots of 1981 exposed the deep tension between police and immigrant communities (Macpherson, 1999).

Modern Era (1980s to present): Attempts at reform and improving relations are evident, alongside continued tensions and confrontations. Events such as the 1992 Los Angeles riots following the acquittal of officers who beat Rodney King, or the death of George Floyd in 2020, continue to highlight the depth of the problem. Floyd's death, which was videotaped and disseminated worldwide, ignited an unprecedented wave of protests against police violence and racial discrimination. It exposed not only the brutality of a specific case but also the ongoing and systematic tension between police and minority communities.

Despite differences between countries, several common structural factors can be identified that contribute to ongoing inequality in police-minority relations:

1. Socioeconomic gaps often lead to minority communities being concentrated in areas with higher crime rates, increasing the likelihood of confrontations with police.

2. Stereotypes and prejudices influence police behavior, as demonstrated by a U.S. study that found officers tend to use more force against black suspects compared to whites in similar circumstances.

3. Historical legacy of discrimination and violence has created deep layers of distrust. For example, a 2020 survey in the U.S. found that only 36% of Black Americans believe the police treat them fairly, compared to 78% of White Americans (Edwards et al., 2020).

4. Over-policing and racial profiling deepen distrust. In New York, for instance, the "stop and frisk" policy led to 87% of those stopped in 2011 being Black or Hispanic, despite them making up only 53% of the city's population.

Economic and social inequality plays a central role. In Britain, a 2017 study found that areas with high concentrations of ethnic minorities suffer from crime rates 25% higher on average compared to other areas.

5. Comparison between Israel Police-Ethiopian Israeli relations and Police-minority relations worldwide

5.1 *Similar characteristics*

The relationship between the Israel Police and the Ethiopian-Israeli community reflects patterns similar to those observed in police-minority relations in many countries worldwide. These characteristics stem from a variety of historical, social, economic, and cultural factors that influence interactions between law enforcement agencies and minority groups.

1. Effects of Racism: Institutional racism is a central factor in tensions between police and minorities worldwide, and Israel is no exception in this context. In the United States, studies show that African Americans experience a higher rate of police stops and use of force. A 2020 study found that blacks were 2.5 times more likely to be killed by police compared to whites (Edwards 2020).

Similarly, in Israel, Israel Police data (2020) show that the arrest rate of young Ethiopian Israelis is 1.5 times higher than their share in the population. A study by the Israel Democracy Institute (2019) found that 40% of young Ethiopian Israelis reported experiencing discrimination from the police, compared to 9% among non-Ethiopian Jewish youth.

2. Historical Impacts: Similar to countries like the United States or South Africa, relations between the Israel Police and the Ethiopian community are influenced by a historical legacy of discrimination. However, while in the U.S. the roots lie in slavery and segregation, in Israel they are more related to the absorption and integration processes of immigrants. For example, the difficulties in absorbing immigration in the 1980s and 1990s and the "melting pot" policy created feelings of alienation and cultural misunderstanding.

3. Socioeconomic Status Effects: Socioeconomic gaps play a central role in police-minority relations worldwide. In Britain, a 2017 study found that areas with high concentrations of ethnic minorities suffer from crime rates 25% higher on average compared to other areas. In Israel, a similar situation exists in neighborhoods where there are high concentrations of Ethiopian Israelis, leading to more frequent interactions with the police.

4. Over-policing and Profiling: Like African Americans in the U.S. or immigrants in France, Ethiopian Israelis report experiences of over-policing. In New York, the "stop and frisk" policy led to 87% of those stopped in 2011 being Black or Hispanic, despite them making up only 53% of the city's population. In Israel, similar patterns are observed, as reflected in the arrest and detention data of young Ethiopian Israelis.

5. Key Events as Catalysts for Change: Similar to the case of George Floyd in the U.S., which ignited a widespread wave of protests, in Israel, events such as the death of Solomon Teka in 2019 led to mass protests and demands for police reform. In both cases, the events exposed deep and long-standing tensions and sparked widespread public debate on police-minority relations.

6. Perceptions of Racism: Surveys show similarities in perceptions of institutional racism among minorities in different countries. In the U.S., a Pew Research Center survey (2020) found that 84% of African Americans believe that blacks are treated less fairly by the police. Similarly, in Israel, a Smith Institute survey (2021) found that 76% of Ethiopian Israelis believe they suffer from police discrimination on racial grounds.

5.2 *Unique characteristics of the Ethiopian Israeli community*

Despite the many similarities, the relationship between the Israel Police and the Ethiopian-Israeli community also presents unique characteristics, stemming from the specific historical, cultural, and social context of Israel and the Ethiopian community:

1. Unique Historical Context: Unlike minorities in many countries, the Ethiopian-Israeli community arrived in Israel as part of government-sponsored immigration operations (Operations Moses and Solomon). This creates a unique dynamic of expectations for integration and equality, which may not necessarily exist among other immigrant communities. The expectation of full acceptance as Jews and Israelis creates deeper frustration when faced with discrimination.

2. Shared Religious Identity: Unlike many other countries, the Ethiopian-Israeli community shares a religious identity with the Jewish majority. This creates additional complexity, as community members experience discrimination despite belonging to the majority religious group. A study by (Kama and Ginzburg 2018) found that 62% of Ethiopian Israelis feel "fully Israeli" but at the same time, 58% feel that Israeli society does not see them as equally Israeli.

3. Shorter Time Frame: While in many countries the relations between police and minorities have developed over hundreds of years, in Israel it is a process of only about 40 years. This affects the depth of the historical roots of distrust, but also allows for greater potential for rapid change.

4. Identity Complexity: Tajfel and Turner's (1979) theory of social identity gains additional validity in the Israeli-Ethiopian context. The complex identity of Ethiopian Israelis as both Jews and Black creates a unique tension. A study by Walsh and Tuval-Mashiach (2012) found that young Ethiopian Israelis experience ongoing identity conflict, affecting their perception of the police as a threatening "other".

5. Unique Social Capital: Putnam's (2000) theory of social capital is uniquely expressed in the Ethiopian-Israeli community. The community demonstrates high levels of bonding social capital, which helps in coping with racism. A study by Sever (2007) found that Ethiopian community organizations serve as a protective factor against the effects of racism and assist in building trust with authorities, including the police.

6. Impact of the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict: In Israel, the tension between the police and the Ethiopian community exists in the context of broader social tensions, including the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. This creates a different dynamic from that existing in other countries, where tensions between police and minorities are often the central issue.

7. Relative Size of the Community: The Ethiopian-Israeli community comprises about 2% of Israel's population, a relatively small proportion compared to minorities in other countries. For example, African Americans make up about 13% of the U.S. population. The smaller relative size may affect the community's political and social influence capacity.

6. Recommendations for Improving Relations between Israel Police and the Ethiopian Community.

In light of the in-depth analysis of the relationship between the Israel Police and the Ethiopian community, and its comparison to police-minority relations worldwide, a comprehensive set of solutions is proposed below. The aim of the program is not only to improve relations between the police and the community but also to strengthen the status of the Ethiopian-Israeli community in Israeli society as a whole, while utilizing its uniqueness as a national asset.

Comprehensive Police reform:

1. Develop in-depth training programs for officers on the history, culture, and customs of the Ethiopian community, alongside workshops to raise awareness of unconscious biases.

2. Organize educational tours for officers to historical and cultural sites related to Ethiopian Jewry.

3. Increase the number of Ethiopian police officers, especially in senior ranks, and create dedicated promotion tracks for officers from diverse backgrounds.

4. Develop a unique career path focusing on international relations and cooperation with police forces in Africa.

Transparency and accountability:

1. Regularly publish data on police activity broken down by ethnic origin.

2. Establish an independent oversight body to examine complaints of discrimination and police violence.

3. Implement a zero-tolerance policy for racism, with clear procedures and strict enforcement at all levels of the police force.

Strengthening Police-community connection:

1. Establish regular forums for dialogue between police representatives and Ethiopian community leaders.

2. Collaborate with community organizations in planning and implementing police policy.

3. Expand the community policing model in neighborhoods with high concentrations of Ethiopian Israelis.

4. Develop dedicated crime prevention programs for Ethiopian youth, in cooperation with welfare and education agencies.

5. Create culturally adapted rehabilitation tracks for offenders from the community.

Empowering the Ethiopian-Israeli community:

1. Establish a national center of excellence for Ethiopian Jewish heritage.

2. Create a cultural ambassadors program to present the unique heritage to the wider public.

3. Organize an annual "Bridge of Worlds" festival to showcase Ethiopian-Jewish culture.

4. Integrate the history and tradition of Ethiopian Jewry into the general curriculum.

5. Develop educational programs for the general public on the Ethiopian community's contribution to Israeli society.

Leadership development and influence:

1. Create leadership programs that integrate youth from all Israeli communities.

2. Establish a unique Beit Midrash (study hall) combining the spiritual tradition of Ethiopian Jewry with classical Jewish studies.

3. Integrate Ethiopian Israelis into key roles in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, especially in relations with African countries.

National and international initiatives:

1. Establish an "Ethio-Tech" innovation center to develop technological solutions for challenges in Africa.

2. Create a student exchange program between Israel, Ethiopia, and other African countries.

3. Make the Sigd holiday a national holiday celebrated by all of Israeli society.

4. Integrate Ethiopian Jewish traditions and ceremonies into national events.

5. Create media series telling the historical story of Ethiopian Jewry.

6. Utilize the knowledge and connections of the Ethiopian community to strengthen relations between Israel and Africa.

7. Organize joint roots journeys for Israelis from all communities, including visits to Ethiopia.

Implementation of the proposed set of solutions requires long-term commitment, appropriate resources, and close cooperation between the police, the Ethiopian community, and additional governmental and social factors. The program offers a holistic approach that addresses existing challenges while utilizing the uniqueness of the Ethiopian-Israeli community as a national asset.

6. Conclusion

This research has revealed the great complexity of the relationship between the Israel Police and the Ethiopian-Israeli community, placing it in a comparative international context. The analysis showed that while there are similar patterns of tension between police and minorities worldwide, the Israeli case presents unique characteristics stemming from the shared history, Jewish identity, and specific circumstances of the immigration and absorption of Ethiopian Jews in Israel.

The findings indicate that existing challenges stem from a combination of historical, social, economic, and cultural factors. Institutional racism, socioeconomic gaps, and deep-rooted stereotypes play a central role in shaping relations between the police and the community. At the same time, the research also uncovered the potential inherent in the uniqueness of the Ethiopian-Israeli community as a cultural and diplomatic bridge.

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The research recommendations emphasize the need for a holistic and multi-systemic approach to rehabilitating trust and building positive relations. This includes comprehensive police reform, community empowerment programs, and national and international initiatives that leverage the uniqueness of the Ethiopian-Israeli community as an asset. The emphasis is on building trust, increasing transparency and accountability, and promoting meaningful dialogue between all involved parties.

The research concludes that improving relations between the police and the Ethiopian-Israeli community is not just a law enforcement challenge, but also an opportunity to strengthen Israel's social fabric and promote a new model of integration and inclusion. Success in this area can serve as a model for addressing similar challenges in multicultural societies worldwide.

Finally, the research calls for continued research and dialogue on the subject, with close cooperation between academia, government, police, and community. Only through a joint and ongoing effort can the existing challenges be overcome and a more just and equal society be built for all its citizens.

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