

Dr. Matan Kaminer, Queen Mary U, London, “Workers in the line of fire: Thai migrants and the war”, 15/9/2025

Introduction

Welcome to *Eyes on Gaza*, our daily gathering that combines protest and learning. Today, in *Eyes on Gaza*, we will continue our focus on Gaza, but also broaden our view to its various contexts—especially those that do not receive enough light or discussion in the dominant public discourse here. We will host Dr. Matan Kaminer, who will speak to us about another population that has disappeared from sight: the Thai migrant workers in the Gaza Envelope. Dr. Kaminer is an anthropologist from Queen Mary University of London and the author of *Capitalist Colonial: Thai Migrant Workers in Israeli Agriculture* (Stanford University Press, 2024). As usual, Matan will speak for eight minutes, after which we will leave time for a short discussion. A reminder: anyone who wishes to ask a question is invited to write it in the chat, and I will read it aloud. Matan, thank you very much for joining us. The floor is yours.

Paper

Thank you very much for the invitation. It’s a pleasure to be here—if one can say so, under the circumstances. I think that the least we can do, in light of the unfolding catastrophe, is to try to understand it a bit better, more deeply, and in broader contexts—as you said, Ayelet. I hope that what I have to say will contribute to that. Given the limited time, I will not go too much into statistics, numbers, or detailed empirical “digging.” I will try instead to offer a general picture, beginning briefly with how I see the role of labor migration in agriculture, and specifically of Thai migrant workers. I will then move to discuss, in short, the context of the war—of course, the killing and assault on the Thai workers on October 7, but also what has happened since.

To be very schematic—and I don’t think we have much choice given the short time—the phenomenon of labor migration in Israel is, in many ways, a result of Palestinian resistance, and specifically of the First Intifada. The First Intifada broke out during a period when there was deep integration of labor from the [occupied] territories—especially from Gaza—into the Israeli labor market. Palestinian workers used the leverage that employment in Israel gave them to exert influence and, of course, to struggle against the occupation—whether through strikes or, at times, more aggressive means such as violence against employers and Israelis in general. The very fact that the borders between Israel and the territories were open until the major closure of 1991 gave Palestinians a point of leverage for their struggle. The Israeli establishment understood this. Rabin, already as Minister of Defense and later as Prime Minister, saw Israel’s dependence on Palestinian labor as a point of vulnerability. Therefore, a process was set in motion—actually already in the 1980s, but it accelerated significantly in the early 1990s, in parallel with the Oslo process—a process we could call the “weaning” of the Israeli labor market and Israeli employers from their reliance on Palestinian labor, especially from Gaza. That is worth emphasizing under the current circumstances.

From 1993–94 onward, the two economic sectors in Israel most dependent on Palestinian labor—construction and agriculture—underwent gradual replacement. It was never total; even up to October 7, until the war, the replacement was not airtight, not absolute. But there was a steady substitution of Palestinian labor with “migrant labor.” There is another sector worth mentioning—the home-care sector, which most of us are familiar with in a very intimate way. It is essentially a new sector that opened in the 1990s; it did not replace an older one. The workers—mostly women from the Philippines, but not only—cannot be considered substitutes for Palestinian workers.

In construction, the situation is more complex. There has been a succession of labor forces from various countries. You may recall that in the early and mid-1990s there were many Romanians in Israel. When Romania joined the European Union, most of them moved on to Spain. I am, of

course, exaggerating a bit, but the opening of employment opportunities in Western Europe made Israel unattractive for Romanian workers. There has been turnover between many countries supplying construction labor to Israel—Turkey, other places in Eastern Europe, and, increasingly in recent years, China. As Chinese corporations entered the Israeli construction market, especially for large projects such as the Tel Aviv Light Rail Transit, they brought with them their own workforce—Chinese labor.

In agriculture, the replacement was the fastest and most complete. It relied almost entirely on labor coming from a single country—Thailand. Due to lack of time, I cannot go into the question of *why* Thailand, which is a very interesting question I've worked on extensively. If there's time during the Q&A, I'll expand on that. There is, of course, no need to elaborate on the ideological and strategic importance of agriculture to Zionism throughout the years. The economic importance of agriculture in Israel has been declining steeply for many decades. Today, agriculture contributes less than 2 percent of Israel's GDP and employs less than 2 percent of its workforce. Economically, therefore, it is not very significant. But it retains ideological and strategic importance—especially in terms of control over land, which remains relevant despite all the changes. Because of this, and due to transformations in agricultural settlements in central Israel, agriculture during the 1990s and 2000s became increasingly concentrated in border areas, in frontier zones. Not all of these are high-risk security zones—for instance, the Arava, where I conducted my doctoral research, is not a high-risk security region.

As for the Gaza Envelope, it is a highly agricultural region. On October 7, around 5,000 Thai migrant workers were in that area (depending, of course, on how one defines the “envelope”). These migrants were, as is known, among the main victims of the October 7 attack—disproportionately so. If I recall correctly, about 45 were killed that day, and over 30 were kidnapped into Gaza. Most of them have since been returned—apparently not as part of any deal by Israel, but rather released, as far as we know, voluntarily or otherwise. Around two or three remain missing or are still in Gaza, likely no longer alive. As for what has happened since October 7: in the first days after the war broke out, the Thai government allowed any worker who wished to leave Israel to do so, at its own expense. About ten thousand out of thirty thousand workers left almost immediately. Very soon, they began returning. Israel granted various easements for those wishing to return, and today there are around forty thousand Thai workers in Israel—more than before the war began.

The government—and I'll end with this—has effectively decided to permanently stop labor entry from the occupied territories. No one enters anymore from Gaza or from the West Bank, which of course has disastrous consequences for the population in the West Bank. At the same time, there are plans to significantly increase the number of migrant workers in various sectors, expanding their employment beyond the ones they were in before—to include industry, hospitality, catering, and tourism. Many of these new migrants are expected to come from Thailand.

I'll conclude here, but it seems to me crucial to pay attention to the close connection between the exploitation and dispossession of Palestinian workers and what is happening with migrant laborers. Alongside the rightful shift of public attention toward the genocide in Gaza, we as Israeli society are paying even less attention than before to the migrant workers among us. That, in itself, is something that deserves reflection—that we must think about together: how not to lose focus on those people among us who are exploited so deeply and horrifically in their daily lives. Thank you.