

# NEWSBRIEF

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## Israel's Geographic-Demographic Threat to Identity

Mahmoud Abbas has begun galvanising the Arab world to embrace a one-state solution. He said to reporters in Saudi Arabia, 'From a historical perspective, there are two states: Israel and Palestine. In Israel, there are Jews and others living there. This we are willing to recognise, nothing else.' Yet a two-state solution does not reduce the Israeli-Arab challenge to Israel's Jewish character – which calls for turning it into a 'state of all its citizens' or a binational state. In 2008, at the eighth annual Doha Forum on Democracy, Development and Free Trade, Israeli-Arab MK Ahmed Tibi accused Israel of having established an 'apartheid state'. Thus Israel's unwillingness to coherently identify how to maintain its Jewish identity before conducting negotiations with its Palestinian counterparts has enabled both sides to demographically challenge its existence.

### Israeli-Arabs

In December 2006, the Israeli-Arab Higher Arab Monitoring Committee advanced a one-state solution in a document entitled: 'The Future Vision of the Palestinian Arabs in Israel'. The report called for a 'consensual democracy' that incorporated the presence of both Palestinians and Jews.<sup>1</sup> Israeli-Arabs may not accept a two-state solution with a Palestinian state within the 1967 borders and could advance a programme for self-determination. Israeli-Arabs pose a conundrum to Israel's political establishment: if Israel reaches an agreement with the PLO, Israeli-Arabs will proceed to challenge the PLO's status. On the other hand, if negotiations fail, a two-state solution will be questioned, allowing in its stead a one-state solution.

A two-state solution would not necessarily prevent Israeli-Arabs taking up the cause of the Palestinians as they did during Israel's military operations in Gaza in 2008. In 2000, a poll published by Israeli daily newspaper *Yediot Ahronot* showed that 66 per cent of Israeli-Arabs would support the Palestinians in any confrontation with Israel, while only 13 per cent would support their own country.<sup>2</sup>

### Israel's Strategic Deficit

Israel's sudden fear of a one-state solution should have been anticipated for decades. It is indicative of the absence of a culture in Israel that encourages long-term strategic thinking. This in turn has polarised Israeli society vis-à-vis its territorial borders. As a result, Israel's political establishment has maintained an incoherent approach to its demographic balance, oscillating between outright denial of the threat and expression of the urgent strategic challenge it poses.

Yasser Arafat explicitly encouraged a policy of seeking to conquer Israel by outnumbering the Jewish people, declaring, 'The womb of the Arab woman is my best weapon.'<sup>3</sup> At the same time the centre of Israeli political society carelessly deflected attention away from strengthening Israel's identity as a Jewish state. Originally, Israel's left- and right-wing parties subscribed to the ideology of the 'Greater Land of Israel'. They both advocated on behalf of building settlements to enhance Israel's strategic depth.

On 14 April 1973, the then Israeli ambassador to the US, Yitzhak Rabin, overlooked geographic considerations and announced: '[t]he process of Jewish rejuvenation is based on the rise of a

state whose great majority is Jewish and which will be founded on Jewish values. Therefore, I doubt if she could hold too large an element of non-Jews.'

At the other end of the political spectrum Rabbi Meir Kahane, founder of the far right-wing Kach party, proclaimed that Arabs were capable of becoming the majority in Israel and, as a result, could democratically undermine the country's Jewish identity. Thus in the most part the issue of maintaining Israel's Jewish identity only fell within the domain of the far right, due in large part to the political establishment's denial of the issue.

During the mid 1990s, *ABC News'* '60 Minutes' programme held a televised debate between Meir Kahane and Ehud Olmert. During the debate Olmert nonchalantly denied a demographic problem, claiming that as Israeli-Arabs only made up 700,000 of the 4 million population, the chance they would become the majority was but a 'remote possibility'. Two nights later, Ted Koppel asked then prime minister Shimon Peres for his proposed solution to this problem. Peres responded, 'as of now, we have none'. Yet Peres had addressed a party forum on August 25, 1977 stating, 'I do not want to wake up one morning to discover that Jerusalem is subject to the demographic fate of Galilee.' Olmert's response, in light of Peres' admitted fear of this demographic problem, revealed he sought to shirk responsibility for the issue. In the debate Olmert went on to discuss the prospect of the US absorbing 100,000 Palestinian refugees with US national security adviser, Stephen Hadley. The proposal also included Israel resettling more Palestinians than the international community would be willing to take in.

Ironically, decades earlier Meir Kahane had been charged with 'incitement to revolution' for sending letters to several thousand Arabs offering them funds and visas to emigrate voluntarily.<sup>4</sup>

Indeed, the Israeli government's strategic thinking began to evolve as it began to propound the need to cede territories for the creation of a Palestinian state. Paradoxically it was Olmert who was ultimately forced to address the issue a few decades later. His initial relegating of geography to demographic concerns was to trigger his later embrace of the policy of unilateral disengagement from the territories. This culminated in Israel, unilaterally and without negotiation, building a security fence to divide the Israeli and Palestinian populations.

#### **Demographics at the Centre of Diplomatic and Security Initiatives**

Until backed against a wall, the political establishment simply did not wish to address questions of how democracy could complement Israel's Jewish identity. Since then every Israeli initiative has focused on boosting Jewish demographics while failing to address the very identity of the state.

Former Israeli prime minister Ariel Sharon combined traditional approaches that were geographic and immigration-based, and then later adopted the position of ceding territory in the form of 'unilateral disengagement'. In 2004, 60 per cent of voters felt the disengagement initiative would help maintain the Jewish majority in Israel. Richard Harris, who at the time headed the US state department's policy planning unit, asked Sharon's lead adviser on the plan, Arnon Sofer, the extent to which his separation map emphasised security versus demography. Sofer replied, '100 per cent demography'.

Similar to that of the disengagement plan, the security fence had a dual function. It aimed to prevent the flow of suicide bombers from Gaza, but also, more fundamentally, to reduce the Arab demographic in Israel.<sup>5</sup> Yet building fences along the Green Line has only delayed the incremental process of a one-state solution, rather than prevented it.

Separating Jewish and Arab demographics was also the motive behind the October 2003 Geneva Initiative. The core focus of the conference was to facilitate the

involuntary transfer of 4.5 million Arabs from refugee camps into several Arab countries, while at the same time transferring 0.5 million Jews from Judea, Samaria and Gaza into pre-1967 Israel. While these policies endeavoured in the short term to boost Israeli-Jewish demographics, they failed to address the issue within the Green Line, and failed to apply institutional and cultural measures to ensure Israel's long-term Jewish character.

#### **Demographic Projections**

Contrary to the assumption that the political establishment implements these short-term approaches due to a lack of statistical projections, Israel is well aware of the impending demographical situation. In 1986, Professor Roberto Bacchi, head of Hebrew University's statistics department, released a study warning Israel of the demographic threat it faced. Decades earlier, just a few months after the Six-Day War in 1967, the Peace and Security Movement warned Israel would be forced to choose between its Jewish and democratic identity should it decide to annex the territories, due to the high Arab birth rate.

So, while Israel has been implementing short-term measures, the demographic issue has become even more of a reality. When policies centred on demographics began in 2002, the birth rate of Arabs in Israel (4.6 children per woman) was nearly double that of Israeli Jews (2.6 children). In 2003, approximately one in every five Israeli citizens was a Muslim Arab and it was predicted that within twenty years the ratio of Arabs to Jews would be one to three. Moreover, Mahdi Abdul-Haid, director of PASSIA, a Palestinian think tank in East Jerusalem, noted that the Palestinian population was increasing at a rate six times faster than that of the Israelis.<sup>6</sup> Israeli demographer Sergio Della Pergola observes that Jews are already slightly less than 50 per cent of the population.<sup>7</sup>

In line with Arafat's aspirations, it is now evident that the Palestinians are successfully moving towards their goal of demographically conquering Israel. According to Israel's Central Bureau of Statistics records last year, there were 5,569,200 Jewish citizens (75 per cent of the population) and 1.4 million Arab citizens within Israel and its West Bank settlements. According to the bureau's Palestinian counterpart, there are nearly 3.76 million Palestinians in the West Bank, the Gaza Strip and East

Jerusalem.<sup>8</sup> Moreover, the Palestinian population has maintained one of the highest fertility rates in the Arab world and thus constitutes one of the most rapidly growing populations in the region.

#### **One-State Solution**

The demographic threat has become so acute that Palestinian demands are shifting towards a one-state solution. Believing the demographic statistics to be in their favour, Palestinian Authority (PA) chief negotiator Ahmed Qurei recently told Palestinian law-makers in Ramallah that if Israel opposed Palestinian wishes, 'then the Palestinian demand for the Palestinian people and its leadership [would be] one state, a binational state.' Additionally, Fatah's leadership has begun an informal debate on a one-state option for if talks for an independent state fail.

The hasty unilateral creation of a Palestinian state by Israel would not offset the Palestinians' acceptance of a one-state solution. There are contradictory motives among Palestinians who favour a single-state solution that would threaten Israel's Jewish identity. Islamist opponents of a binational solution argue it would run contrary to the goal of a pan-Islamic state ruled under Islamic or Sharia law. Alternatively, Sari Nusseibeh, president of Al-Quds University in Jerusalem, suggested many Palestinians would feel more at home in a democracy shared with Israelis than in a Palestinian state run by Hamas. In contrast, a dysfunctional PA, unwilling to provide requirements of peace negotiations and subject to corruption and systemic failure, will inevitably advance the idea of a single-state solution.

Moreover, knowing the Jewish character of Israel can be undermined through the democratic process of 'one man, one vote', Saudi Arabia introduced its 2002 Saudi Initiative. Inter alia, this offered pan-Arab recognition of Israel in exchange for Israel's withdrawal from lands captured in 1967. It also involved granting millions of Palestinians the right to return to pre-1967 land. Aware that the initiative's implications would eradicate Israel's Jewish identity, left-wing Israeli politician Yossi Beilin correctly noted, 'we have little time to lose before we face an old [apartheid] South Africa situation where Palestinians would demand 'one man, one vote'. It would be the end of Zionism.'

The lack of willingness to coherently address this demographic threat has caused Israel to simultaneously recognise the ensuing reality while denying the need to address it. Diplomatically, this has placed Israel at odds with the US. The demographic threat facing Israel and the loyalty of its citizens must transcend the numerous shades of its political spectrum. This would result in a set of long-term strategic policies which could be readily appreciated and addressed by the US. Once this has been achieved Israeli policies will evolve from a secure and coherent identity, and not vice versa.

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#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Reflecting this sentiment, a February 2007 poll conducted by Near East Consulting indicated that 70.4 per cent of Palestinians support 'a one-state solution in historic Palestine where Muslims, Christians and Jews have equal rights and responsibilities.'

<sup>2</sup> In 2007, Mada al-Carmel: Arab Center for Applied Social Research carried out its own poll among Israeli-Arabs. 73 per cent of the respondents expressed the opinion that PA negotiators have no right to approve a land swap with Israel. The survey also revealed that almost 80 per cent are against dropping the demand for the 'right of return.'

<sup>3</sup> Joseph A D'Agostino, 'Israel's Demographic Geopolitics', Population Research Institute, August 2005.

<sup>4</sup> Meir Kahane, *They Must Go* (Grosset & Dunlap, 1981).

<sup>5</sup> Benjamin Netanyahu said at the 2002 Herzliya National Security Conference that the security fence must be

constructed at an accelerated pace to separate the two populations and to prevent a 'demographic exodus' from beyond the Green Line into Israel proper.

<sup>6</sup> Admittedly there is an alternative set of data spearheaded by Yoram Ettinger that points to inflated Palestinian statistics.

This is due to the duplicate counting of East Jerusalem's population, who appear in both the Palestinian and Israeli census, and by including people living abroad who possess local identification cards; however this does not address the Israeli-Arab birth rate within the Green Line.

<sup>7</sup> Della Pergola combines the Palestinian population of the Gaza Strip and West Bank, includes foreign workers and refugees and omits Israelis who immigrated to Israel under the Law of Return, but who are not recognised as Jews by the Interior Ministry.

<sup>8</sup> This is up 30 per cent from 2.89 million a decade earlier.