THE RED THREAD OF ISRAEL'S "DEMOGRAPHIC PROBLEM"

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In the spring and early summer of 2018, Israeli forces shot or gassed more than 16,000 people. The ferocity of this response to the massing of Palestinians near the barrier surrounding the Gaza Strip is striking but not astonishing. It reflects a fundamental truth and springs from a deep fear. The truth is that the essential aspiration of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century architects of the Zionist movement was to ensure that somewhere in the world — and that place came to be Palestine — there would be a majority of Jews. The fear is of Jews losing the majority they achieved.

For centuries, said the founders of Zionism, Jews lived as a minority everywhere and as a majority nowhere; everywhere as guests, nowhere as hosts. This unnatural condition they identified as the taproot of anti-Semitism. Gentile fear and hatred of Jews would end, or at least diminish, to safe levels once Jews could point to a land where they, like other "normal" peoples, were a majority and among whom lived others as minorities and as guests.

Demographic predominance in Palestine thus became Zionism's categorical imperative. The contradiction between this objective and other Zionist goals (including settling and ruling the "whole Land of Israel") explains much about the history of Zionism and Israel. It also explains Israel's unblinking use of violence against thousands of men, women and children and why Israel's inability to sustain a Jewish majority is accelerating its adoption of less and less deniable forms of apartheid.

The longest and bitterest unresolved conflict within Zionism is the territorial question. If Zionism requires a Jewish majority, should Zionists forgo options for territorial expansion in Palestine/the Land of Israel in order to protect Jewish demographic preponderance? Or should the movement's commitment to "liberating" the whole land and faith in the growth of the Jewish population be strong enough to seize and keep as much as possible? In the 1930s, the World Zionist Organization split over this question. In 1937, David Ben-Gurion and the Labor Zionist leadership of the movement, using arguments of demography, desperate need and realism, was barely able to convince his associates to at least negotiate with the British about their offer to partition Palestine into Jewish and Arab states. The British withdrew the offer, but Ben-Gurion was astounded and gratified to learn that, with partition, the British had imagined evacuating most of the Arab population of the Jewish state.

The image of attaining so purely Jewish a state fired Ben-Gurion's imagination and helped lay the groundwork for his excitement about accepting the UN partition plan 10 years later.[1]

Demographic considerations weighed heavily in Ben-Gurion's decision to accept a truncated and divided Jewish state, as outlined in the UN partition resolution of November 1947. But as it stood, the state would still have as many Arabs as Jews living in it. Having judged that his forces would prevail in the fighting that engulfed the country, that international intervention would not occur, and that a Jewish state would emerge, what became crucial was to ensure that the "liberation" of additional territories did not threaten the imperative of Jewish demographic predominance. Under Ben-Gurion's direction, the Haganah (the Zionist movement's main underground army) and its strike force, the Palmach, then acted to systematically reduce the Arab population of the areas the state came to control. This was accomplished by expulsions and by refusing to allow refugees to return to their homes. The same demographic imperative also helps to explain Ben-Gurion's decision to overrule his commanders and refuse permission to extend the war by conquering the West Bank. Ben-Gurion wanted the territory, but he feared the demographic implications of its large Arab population more.

In the decade prior to the June War of 1967, Labor Party governments, whether under Ben-Gurion's leadership or not, de-emphasized irredentism, characterized the West Bank as "foreign territory," and more or less accepted a small Arab minority as a permanent feature of the State of Israel. But the question of balancing the rule of more of the Land of Israel against increasing the country's non-Jewish population reasserted itself with a vengeance after the June War. Not only did the "Revisionist" Zionist right wing — founded by Vladimir Jabotinsky and led by Menachem Begin — find new public excitement and support for its traditional irredentism, so also did radical fundamentalist elements within Jewish orthodox circles and groups within the "activist" wing of the Socialist Zionist movement affiliated with the powerful Hameuchad kibbutz movement and a variety of land-development and settlement-building institutions. From 1967 to 1977, Labor Party-led coalition governments found themselves paralyzed by the conflict between those who wanted the occupied territories (especially the West Bank and Gaza Strip) more than they were concerned about the Arabs who lived there, and those who were so opposed to the possibility of absorbing more non-Jews into the state that they favored quickly relinquishing the "administered areas" — or at least the most densely inhabited regions within them. This paralysis appeared very quickly, resulting in the Eshkol government's famous "decision not to decide" and the dominance of Defense Minister Moshe Dayan's approach of tightening Israel's control of and presence on the land while holding the Arabs living there at arm's length.

To be sure, in June 1967, Israel did extend the enforcement of its laws to a 71-square kilometer chunk of the West Bank that included East Jerusalem (al-Quds). But even this act was meticulously implemented according to the demands of the demographic imperative. The expanded boundary of what Israel announced as the municipality of Jerusalem twisted and turned to maximize vacant land while minimizing the number of Arab inhabitants. Deliberately avoiding formal "annexation"

or the declaration of Israeli sovereignty over the area (something that was also avoided in the 1980 "Basic Law: Jerusalem, Capital of Israel"), the government issued a complex collection of amendments to existing laws and ministerial decrees. Their effect was to extend the boundaries of the Israeli municipality of Yerushalayim, rather than the boundaries of the State of Israel. One crucial reason for this subterfuge was that it made the 60,000 Arab inhabitants of al-Quds and its environs "permanent residents" but *not* Israeli citizens, thereby softening the political consequences of adding to the demographic burden of the country's non-Jewish minority.[2]

During the first decade of the occupation, the discourse in Israel over the disposition of the territories was most commonly expressed and depicted as a struggle between "annexationists" and "anti-annexationists." But when the Likud formed the first non-Labor-party-led government in 1977, under its enthusiastically irredentist and explicitly annexationist leader, Menachem Begin, it did not annex the territories or declare sovereignty over them. The single most important factor explaining why Begin refrained from implementing the principle that had been his life-long passion was demography.

In 1977, during the ramp-up to the Camp David summit with Anwar Sadat and Jimmy Carter, Begin offered an Israeli citizenship option for the population he referred to as "the Arabs of the Land of Israel living in Judea, Samaria, and the Gaza District" if Israel's sovereignty over these areas were recognized. But this provision, contained in the hand-written version of Begin's original "autonomy plan," was quickly removed. Even for the Cabinet of a government dominated by territorial maximalists, awarding citizenship to millions of Palestinians was too direct and dangerous a contradiction of Zionism's demographic imperative.

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Accordingly, instead of declaring Israeli sovereignty over the portions of the country under Israel's control (an act that would have implied or strongly risked citizenship for millions more Arabs) the Begin government used the autonomy negotiations that were part of the Camp David peace process as camouflage to massively expand settlement and rapidly advance processes of de facto annexation. This was a slow and unofficial incorporation of the territories that would not entail change in the political status of their Arab inhabitants. The Israeli "left," what became known as "the peace camp," panicked, believing that a "point of no return" would soon be reached beyond which the Arabs of the territories would, willy-nilly, become part of the State of Israel. The primary argument it offered to ordinary Israelis in support of territorial compromise appealed to their fear of and distaste for Arabs and to the Zionist imperative of protecting Israel's Jewish majority, which would be imperiled if the West Bank and

Gaza were permanently incorporated.

But stoking Jewish hatred of Arabs led many Israeli Jews in a very different direction, toward support for the "transfer" or expulsion of Arabs out of the territories and even out of the country. From the early days of the Zionist movement, most of its members rejected mass expulsion as a way to fulfill the demographic imperative, for moral or practical reasons or both. Nevertheless, the idea was regularly if quietly discussed. In his diary, Theodore Herzl fantasized about trying to "spirit the penniless Arab population across the border." As noted, Ben-Gurion's 1937 epiphany, that a large-scale transfer of Arabs was something the international community could tolerate, paved the way for the removal of seven-eighths of the non-Jews living in the portions of Palestine that became the State of Israel in 1948. Instructively, the fact that mass expulsion occurred in 1948 and was violently enforced all along the Armistice Lines in the early 1950s, was denied by Zionist and Israeli propagandists for decades. This avoided the need to justify it but also implied that, had it occurred, it would not have been justified.

This changed in the 1980s. Israeli historians, with access to state and army archives, proved that demographically motivated forcible transfer had occurred in 1948. Along with the need to respond to the demographic argument of Israeli doves, this more honest account of the past encouraged many on the right to embrace the truth of past expulsions and the correctness of this approach for meeting the demographic challenges of the 1980s. As it became clear that even governments ideologically committed to annexation would not implement it because of the demographic problem or the fear of being punished by voters for adding millions

of Arabs to the state's population, and as Arab citizens attained at least a modicum of national political influence, right-wing politicians amplified explicit calls for expulsion of Arabs, through either "voluntary" or "involuntary transfer." These appeals emanated from Rehavam Ze'evi's "Moledet" (Homeland) Party, which made encouragement of "voluntary transfer" of all Arabs from the Land of Israel its central objective.

Outright expulsion was advanced most vehemently by Meir Kahane's Kach Party. Kahane was an American rabbi who founded the violent Jewish Defense League. After immigrating to Israel, he ran for Knesset on a platform of imposing strict segregationist and discriminatory laws against Arabs, including laws against miscegenation. But his fundamental demand was to rid the country of Arabs, by intimidation if possible, and by force if necessary. His slogan was, "I say what you think!" and it resonated strongly with disadvantaged sectors, the young and the poorly educated, Mizrahi Jews (Jews from Muslim countries or whose parents immigrated from Muslim countries). In August 1984, 15 percent of Israeli Jews surveyed agreed that "the Arab population across the green line should be deported."[3] In 1985, the *New York Times* described Kahane as the most talked about politician in Israel. At one point that year, polls showed his party winning up to 12 seats if new elections were held. In September 1986, 38 percent of Jewish Israelis said they supported those working to "make the Arabs leave Judea and Samaria."[4]

Prior to the 1988 election, the Likud leadership concluded that the Kach Party could ruin its chances of forming a new government by depriving it of at least two or three seats in the Knesset. Accordingly,

it promulgated an "anti-racism" law that barred Kach from competing. Although the eruption of the Palestinian Intifada intensified Jewish fears and encouraged "transferist" talk in some right-wing and settler circles, the tenacity of the revolt, the Israeli military's definition of it as a political problem requiring a political solution, the logistical challenges of arranging demographically significant expulsions, explicit warnings from left-wing figures that Jews would actively work to thwart orders to deport masses of Arabs, and Prime Minister Shamir's participation in the Madrid conference, combined to drain "transfer" of its public appeal and its discursive resonance.

However, in recent decades the idea of removing masses of Arabs from the country has again increased. According to a series of surveys conducted by the Pew Foundation in 2014 and 2015, 48 percent of Jewish Israelis agreed or strongly agreed with the statement that "Arabs should be expelled or transferred from Israel," including 87.5 percent of those describing themselves as right wing. On the other hand, despite substantial political and psychological support for such drastic measures, the mass removal of Arabs from the country no longer appears in Israeli political discourse as an explicitly advocated formula for solving the "demographic problem."

But if expulsion as a solution disappeared from view, the problem remained. While the left continued to use demography to insist on the need for withdrawal from most of the West Bank and Gaza, what became known as "the national camp," offered an "old-new" solution. Latching onto the rapidly changing situation in Moscow, it promised a flood of new Jewish immigrants. The government and the Jewish Agency (an arm of the World Zionist Organization) poured money into immigration and absorption efforts targeting the former Soviet Union, deployed a network of settler activists and other "*shlichim*" (immigrant recruiters) to scour the former Soviet Union for recruits, and successfully pressured the United States to prevent Jews leaving the Soviet Union from "dropping out" to settle in America.

However, the number of Jews in the former Soviet Union, though large, was not large enough to change frightening demographic projections. By the early 1990s, it became necessary to depend on attracting non-Jewish immigrants. By taking advantage of an amendment to the Law of Return from the 1970s, anyone with a relationship by marriage or blood to a Jewish grandparent or spouse was deemed "eligible to enter Israel under the Law of Return." As a result of this policy, it is estimated that 35 percent of the more than 900,000 immigrants who came to Israel from the former Soviet Union after 1989 were not Jewish. This reality was suppressed for many years but is now well known. In effect, to solve the demographic problem, the right was willing to measure the number of Jews in the country, not against the number of non-Jews, but against the number of Arabs. They would protect Israel's status, not as a "Jewish state," but as a "non-Arab state."[5] Toward this end, tens of thousands of Ethiopian Jews and those who claimed their ancestors were Jews, were brought to Israel (the first groups of them were secretly settled in Kiryat Arba, the large Jewish settlement on the outskirts of Hebron in the West Bank). More controversial were worldwide searches by immigration recruiters desperate to combat the Arab demographic threat by discovering "lost tribes" of Jews (or at least non-Arabs) in southern Africa, Central and Latin America, and South Asia.

In the early 2000s, Jewish immigration into Israel dwindled while alarms were raised about relatively high rates of Jewish emigration. Indeed, annual calculations revealed that in some years more Jews were leaving than entering the country. In this context, demographic concerns intensified, and a new "solution" emerged: disengagement from the densely populated Gaza Strip.

In 1973, Golda Meir's government had declared the Gaza Strip "an inseparable part of Israel," and by the second intifada 8,000 Jewish settlers were living there. But as the Strip's desperate and rapidly increasing population moved past the 1.5 million mark, and as dozens of bloody suicide attackers struck civilian and military targets in Israel, extricating Israel from Gaza presented itself as the next big idea for alleviating demographic anxieties. In 2002, noted Israeli political geographer, Arnon Soffer, wrote a letter to Prime Minister Ariel Sharon referring to "the grave demographic data" that he had provided him months earlier. "Most of the inhabitants of Israel," wrote Soffer, "realize that there is only one solution in the face of our insane and suicidal neighbor — separation." In its absence, he wrote, was "the end of the Jewish state."

Arnon framed the issue in specific demographic terms, but linked it directly to the security fears that were peaking during the second Intifada. "You should remember that on the same day as the Israel Defense Forces are investing efforts and succeeding in eliminating one terrorist or another, on that very same day, as on every day of the year, within the territories of western Israel, about 400 children are being born, some of whom will become new suicide terrorists! Do you realize this?"[6] With talk of expulsion receding from the discourse and most Israelis losing faith in the prospect for decisively large waves of Jewish immigration, policy experts began intensive discussions of how to draw a "separation" line between Jews and Arabs. The line that could be drawn most easily and have the most consequential impact on the demographic balance was the line around the Gaza Strip. Hence was born Sharon's policy of unilateral Israeli disengagement from Gaza.

> **The line that could be drawn most easily and have the most consequential impact on the demographic balance was the line around the Gaza Strip.**

In the face of furious settler and right-wing opposition, Israel did withdraw its forces and its settlers from the Gaza Strip in 2005. It is an important question whether — in light of regular military incursions into the Strip by the Israeli Army; countless rocket, tunnel, kite and balloon attacks into Israel from Gaza; Israel's tight land and sea blockade of the area; constant surveillance of the Gazan population by drones and other means; the delicate and uncertain connection between Gaza and Egypt; and the intimate infrastructural, water, sewage and health relationships between Israel and Gaza — it is appropriate to think of the Arabs of Gaza as living outside of Israel or not. But whether one considers Gaza still to be within the power of the State of Israel or not, it was certainly not easy to accomplish the extent of separation from Gaza that Israel achieved by the disengagement. Deserted by half the Likud, Sharon formed a new party

(Kadima) to lead his government and was forced as well to rely on support from the opposition Labor Party, whose voters were decisively convinced by the demographic payoff of disengagement. As the last Labor Party prime minister, Ehud Barak, had put it, "We here, and them there."

By removing Israeli military forces from within the Strip, Israel subtracted approximately 1.7 million Palestinian Arabs from the non-Jewish population living in areas it claimed as sovereign territory or as occupied under the terms of the Hague Regulations of 1907. The fact that the main impetus for this move was the demographic imperative was underlined by a new right-wing argument that official population statistics were false and drastically misleading. The argument became very prominent as the Jewish public became aware that, even without counting the burgeoning Gaza population, an intolerably large cohort of Arabs within Israel and the West Bank was projected to develop during the coming decade.

The argument was launched after the second intifada, as a political gambit by an organization calling itself the American-Israeli Demographic Research Group (AIDRG) — a dozen researchers, settler activists and right-wing publicists, none with demographic training. The group was funded by businessman Bennet Zimmerman and most prominently represented by a former Israeli diplomat with experience in the United States, Yoram Ettinger. Ettinger proved himself an indefatigable promoter of the false claim that there were up to 1.6 million fewer Arabs in the West Bank than was generally believed. Ettinger and his collaborators sweetened this argument by manufacturing statistics to suggest that demographic and immigration trends would ensure a stable and even rising Jew-

ish majority. The effort received a boost in early 2005, during the final months of struggle against the Gaza disengagement, when the American Enterprise Institute hosted a presentation by Bennet Zimmerman, Michael Wise and Roberta Seid. The "findings" of their study were widely publicized and used to support dramatic claims that there was no "demographic time bomb" set to explode as the leftists claimed, no "demographic machete" held over the neck of the Jewish state. Accordingly, there was no need to abandon either Gaza or the West Bank.

The Ettinger argument was ridiculed by professional demographers but widely accepted as truth among settler activists and their supporters, who claimed that both the Israeli Central Bureau of Statistics and the Palestinian Central Bureau of Statistics had conspired to demoralize Israeli Jews and justify policies of territorial withdrawal. In February 2006, the leading right-wing think tank in Israel at the time, the Begin Sadat Center at Bar-Ilan University, published a 73-page monograph by Zimmerman, Seid, and Wise, *The Million Person Gap: The Arab Population of the West Bank and Gaza*,[7] adorned with multiple appendices and 129 footnotes. Experts scoffed at the text's willful and intricate misrepresentations of demographic data and concepts. However, for those committed to keeping the Palestinian territories under Israeli rule — sensitive to the demographic imperative of Zionism and worried by the "peace camp's" ability to invoke this imperative to justify territorial compromise — the claims advanced by AIDRG were as irresistible as they were unfounded.

Indeed, the loyalty Ettinger's argument has commanded among settlers and their supporters has sufficed to force many

journalists to treat it as an "alternative" understanding of the nature of Israel's demographic challenge. But the attempt to solve the "demographic problem" by voodoo demographics failed. The authors of the BESA study never responded to detailed critiques of their work. AIDRG was disbanded without convincing most Israelis that the demographic problem was smaller than they thought, or that rising Jewish fertility rates and sustained high levels of immigration made it unnecessary to be concerned about absorbing the Arab population of the occupied territories. In a content analysis of the Israeli press in the 20 years between 1994 and 2013, Uriel Abulof showed demographic concerns peaked prior to the Israeli withdrawal from Gaza in 2005 and dropping significantly for several years after that, but demographic anxiety rising again in 2011 and 2012, even as other threats (specifically, perceived dangers associated with Iranian nuclear technology) took center stage. In the last year of Abulof's survey (2013) approximately 40 percent of all articles about threats to the state's survival were focused on demography. The "demographic demon," wrote Abulof in 2014, was "omnipresent" in Israeli political discourse.[8]

In recent years, its salience has increased even more. As the plausibility of a negotiated two-state solution has disappeared, the reality of Israel's permanent entanglement with the entire Arab population of the country, from the Jordan River to the Mediterranean Sea, has triggered waves of demographic panic. Fevered discussion of the issue was ignited in March 2018, when an Israeli military official made public what had been believed by demographers for several years: that there were more Arabs living in Israel, the West Bank and Gaza, than Jews.[9]

The struggle to respond to the demographic imperative has run like a red thread through the history of the Zionist movement and the State of Israel: from partition, to transfer, to mass immigration of non-Jews, to disengagement from Gaza, to statistical manipulation. Now there are signs of a new approach to the problem, an approach asserting the centrality, not of a Jewish majority capable of democratically enforcing Jewish rule over the country, but of a Jewish state strong enough to rule a non-Jewish majority. That is the real meaning of the Knesset's passage of "Basic Law: Israel as the Nation-State of the Jewish People." It is also the meaning of the increasing readiness of Israelis and Israeli politicians to discuss and embrace the legal incorporation of the West Bank on terms that would ensure that the masses of Arabs living there would never become equal citizens. Instead they would fit into the Israeli state as lower-caste subjects of a ruling apparatus controlled by and for Jews. Within this regime of domination, West Bank Palestinians might aspire to some sort of status higher than that of Gaza Arabs, but lower than that of either Arabs living in expanded East Jerusalem or those born within the pre-1967 boundaries. In other words, apartheid — a minority controlling others according to different rules in a hierarchy of privilege and subordination — is most probably the next attempt to exorcise the demographic demon.

Levi Eshkol was prime minister in 1967, when the West Bank and Gaza Strip were occupied by Israeli forces. For Eshkol and his Cabinet ministers, the "demographic danger" posed by their 1.5 million Palestinian inhabitants was recognized and openly discussed as soon as the fighting ended. "We won the war and received a nice dowry of territory," Eshkol quipped,"

"but it came with a bride whom we don't like."[10] For 130 years, the Zionist movement and the State of Israel have tried desperately to resolve the dilemma posed by its desire for the dowry (as much of the Land of Israel/Palestine as it can get) and its dislike of the bride (the Arab population of the country). When apartheid fails, as have other strategies for evading the implications of the irremovable presence of six million Arabs, it may finally be required to try to make the marriage work, even if that means that each partner becomes something very different from who they are now and what they thought they would be.

[1] See Ian S. Lustick and Matthew Berkman, "Zionist Theories of Peace in the Pre-state Era: Legacies of Dissimulation and Israel's Arab Minority," *Israel and Its Palestinian Citizens: Ethnic Privilege and Equal Citizenship*, Nadim N. Rouhana and Sahar S. Huneidi's, eds., (Cambridge University Press, 2017), 63-5.

[2] For legal details on the incorporation of expanded East Jerusalem in the absence of actual annexation, see Ian S. Lustick, "Has Israel Annexed East Jerusalem?" *Middle East Policy* 5, no. 1 (January 1997):34-45.

[3] Poll conducted by Dahaf, reported by Yoram Peri in *Davar*; August 3, 1984.

[4] Poll conducted by Hanoch Smith, reported in *Davar*, October 2, 1986.

[5] For details see Ian S. Lustick, ""Israel as a Non-Arab State: The Political Implications of Mass Immigration of Non-Jews," *Middle East Journal* 53, no. 3 (Summer 1999): 101-17.

[6] Lily Galili, "A Jewish Demographic State," June 28, 2002, *Haaretz*.

[7] An earlier version of the monograph appeared with the title *The Million and a Half Person Gap: The Arab Population of the West Bank and Gaza*. For a detailed analysis of the fraudulent methods and conclusions of this study see Ian S. Lustick, "What Counts is the Counting: 'Statistical Manipulation' as a Solution to Israel's "Demographic Problem.'" *Middle East Journal* 67, no. 2 (Spring 2013): 185-205.

[8] Uriel Abulof, "Deep Securitization and Israel's 'Demographic Demon,'" *International Political Sociology* 8, no. 4 (December 2014): 408.

[9] Yoram Berger, "Figures Presented by the Army Show More Arabs than Jews Live in Israel, West Bank, and Gaza," *Haaretz*, March 26, 2018; https://www.haaretz.com/israel-news/army-presents-figures-showing-arab-majority-in-israel-territories-1.5940676.

[10] Avi Raz, *The Bride and the Dowry: Israel, Jordan, and the Palestinians in the Aftermath of the June 1967 War* (Yale University Press, 2012), 39.