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The Changing Face of Israel

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As minority groups swell in numbers, the country's political makeup is destined for a shift, too.

With U.S. President Barack Obama seemingly determined to push for a two-state solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, and Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu equally adamant that he lacks a real partner for peace, the United States and Israel seem destined for a clash. But there are larger forces at work than the policies of either government. The face of Israel is changing, and in ways that explain much of what is happening in the Jewish state today.

Take Avigdor Lieberman, whose rising political star befuddles much of the Israeli establishment. Despite being perennially poised on the verge of multiple indictments for financial crimes, tagged as an Arab-loathing ultra nationalist by the Israeli media, and attacked from both sides of the political spectrum as the Jewish state's very own public diplomacy nightmare, the new foreign minister's voter appeal has climbed steadily. And the popularity of his right-wing party, Yisrael Beytenu ("Israel Our Home") has grown as well, even among young, secular Israeli-born Jews. Why?

Many have offered explanations for Lieberman and Yisrael Beytenu's rise, from rocket attacks to a religious revival, but one key factor has been overlooked thus far: They have demographics firmly on their side. The party's platform taps into the fears of the country's demographically ebbing secular middle ground and feeds off of working Israelis' frustrations with the country's two most dissonant minorities -- Israeli Arabs and ultra-Orthodox Jews (*haredim*) -- both of which are on the demographic upswing.

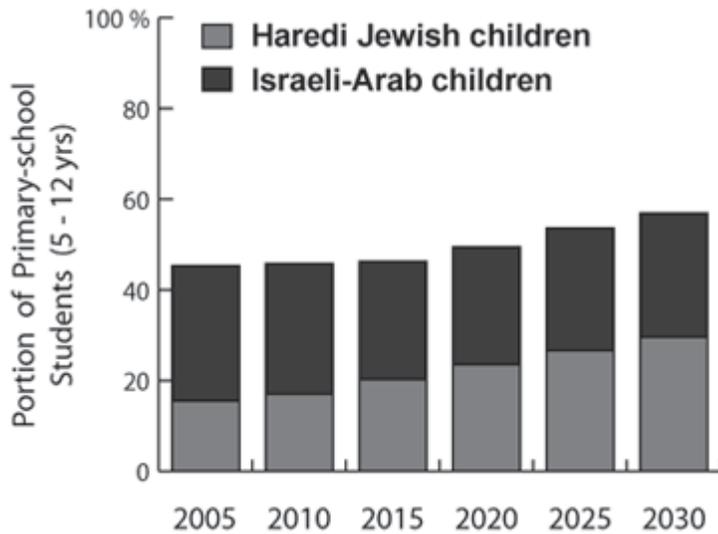


Fig. 1. Projected trend in primary school student composition.

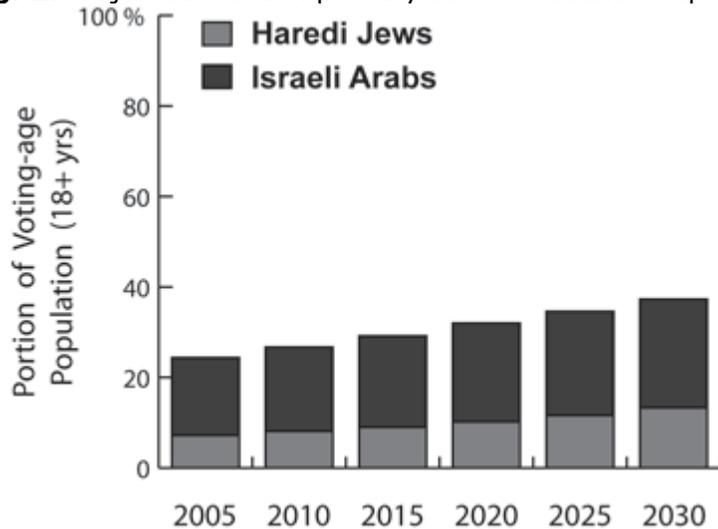


Fig. 2. Projected trend in voting-age population.

The numbers are impressive. In 1960, the Israeli Central Statistical Bureau (ICSB) reported that just 15 percent of students in the Israeli primary-school system were either Israeli Arabs or haredim. Now, about 46 percent are. Around 2020, the majority of primary-school students will likely be composed of children from those two groups, each segregated into its own segment of the school system (Fig. 1). And though, at current rates, it will be well beyond the time horizon of our current projections before these two politically disparate groups "dominate" the Israeli electorate (Fig. 2), by 2030 they are likely to be very close to composing half of all 18- and 19-year olds, the youngest tier of the electorate and the age at which Israelis are first eligible for conscription (Fig. 3a & b) -- a dramatic shift in Israeli ethnic and religious composition.

Such a development is completely contrary to the demographic hopes of Israel's secular Zionist founders, which hinged on a healthy pace of secular-Jewish childbearing and steady streams of Jewish immigrants. For the long run, the founders trusted in the powers of prosperity and modernity to turn Israel's kaleidoscopic assortment of Jewish and non-Jewish ethnic communities into a modern multi ethnic population with European-like aspirations for women and European-like levels of fertility (a measure demographers use to estimate the trend in lifetime childbirths per woman).

The demographic outcomes of six decades of nation-building and social investment are mixed. Descendants of European and American Jewish émigrés have, indeed, stayed somewhat above the two-child replacement level, unlike those who remained overseas. But Jewish immigration to Israel has been more episodic than continuous. The post-independence wave (1948-51), which brought about 700,000 immigrants to Israel's shores, was followed by nearly four decades of much lower levels and then another great wave -- from 1990 to 2000 -- of more than 900,000 émigrés, mostly from the former Soviet Union. But today, most sources put Israel's net influx at less than 20,000 immigrants per year, which accounts for about 18 percent of the country's annual population growth.

Meanwhile, the hope that fertility levels between Israel's different populations would even out has already largely been fulfilled. Although women arriving from traditional North African, Middle Eastern, and Asian Jewish communities averaged well over five children in the 1950s, their granddaughters now average fewer than three. Israeli Arab fertility, too, has dropped, albeit at a slower pace, from more than seven children per woman in the 1950s to about 3.6 today. Among Israeli Arabs, who now make up 20 percent of Israel's 7.1 million resident citizens, Muslims (83 percent of Israeli Arabs) are estimated by the ICSB at 3.9 children per woman. Arab Christians currently make up just over 8 percent of Israeli Arabs, with fertility at about 2.1 children per woman.

But there's one major outlier: the haredim population. While official statistics are unavailable, academics report that ultra-Orthodox women bear, on average, about 7 children per woman -- in other words, there has been no decline in their fertility since Israel's establishment. That the Haredim -- 7 to 11 percent of Israel's population, and growing at an estimated 4 percent annually -- are expanding faster than either Israeli Arabs or the rest of Israel's Jewish population should be no surprise. Haredi sects grew out of 19th-century movements aimed expressly at revitalizing and propagating theologically conservative Judaism and deterring secularization and conversion.

The growth in the haredi population troubles secular Jews for a whole host of reasons, most of them economic. Ultra-Orthodox young men obtain draft deferments and student stipends by extending their study -- for decades -- in religious schools (yeshiva), which are also subsidized by the government. Because they don't work or develop job skills, haredim contribute little to tax revenues and tend to be poor, qualifying them for welfare assistance. And because haredi family sizes are large, they receive government-sponsored child allowances.

Beyond the economic drag, there's politics: Ultra-Orthodox rabbis control access to marriage, conversion, and burial, effectively determining the status of non-haredi private lives across the varied Jewish community. In addition, ultra-Orthodox activists flex their political muscle by censoring advertising and movies, organizing consumer boycotts, mounting mass demonstrations, and harassing secular Jews who violate the Sabbath. Once peace-process-disinterested members of various coalition governments, ultra-Orthodox politicians now rank among the most hawkish in the Knesset, defending haredi settlements on the West Bank and in East Jerusalem. Although less politically cohesive, Israeli Arab voters favor the flip side of the political spectrum, which makes moderate Israelis wonder how their democracy might function should these two groups grow to dominate the electorate.

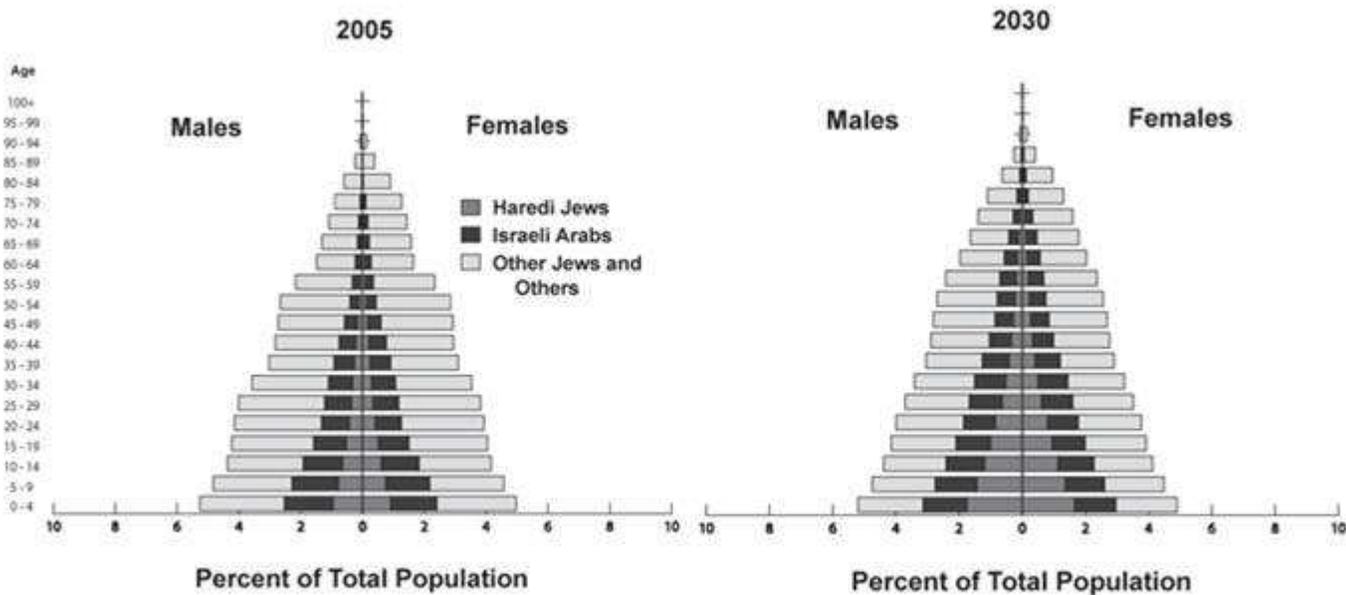


Fig. 3. Projected changes in the composition of Israel's age structure, 2005 to 2030

Yisrael Beytenu's focus on Israel's demographic destiny gives its platform an unconventional twist. Unlike other parties on Israel's political far right, Yisrael Beytenu's Knesset members support the establishment of a Palestinian state and the passage of a pro-immigrant secular marriage law. But unlike those to the center and left, the party calls for an oath of loyalty as a prerequisite to the full rights of citizenship -- a scheme that would likely purge a substantial portion of the growing Israeli Arab population from voting rolls and quite possibly disenfranchise a segment of ultra-Orthodox Jews who, on scriptural and political grounds, object to Zionism and the Jewish state that it spawned.

Yisrael Beytenu also proposes to hinge eligibility for social benefits on fulfillment of military or community service, driving a wedge between groups who are typically conscripted into the Israel Defense Forces (IDF) and those who are not. It's not only native-born and non native Jewish citizens who fulfill compulsory IDF service. So do

émigrés of mixed origin, Israeli-Arab Drus, and Israeli Circassians. On the other side of this demographic divide are ultra-Orthodox in religious schools and Muslim and Christian Arabs who are not conscripted or sought after, and who don't typically seek IDF service.

Perhaps the most contentious element of Yisrael Beytenu's demographic agenda is titled "land for land, peace for peace." Rejecting government "land for peace" initiatives with neighboring Arab states, it proposes instead to swap Israeli-Arab border towns (and Israeli Arabs) for close-in Jewish settlements on the West Bank. Even with Lieberman heading Israel's Foreign Ministry, this proposal may not surface publicly under the Likud-led coalition. Land swaps are ideologically unpalatable to either the left, for whom Israeli-Arab rights are non negotiable, or the right, for whom each square kilometer secured within the Green Line (Israel's pre-1967 border) is symbolic of national sacrifice. Nonetheless, the swap appeals to many within government and in the public. Moreover, it's another of Yisrael Beytenu's demographic game-changers: It might circumvent the impasse created by the settlements while taking a chunk of Arab population growth out of Israel's political future.

It is probably unwise to attempt near-term political predictions for a system where new break away parties, comingled electoral lists, and governments composed of strange political bedfellows are commonplace. We offer just one: As the secular proportion of Jewish voters recedes, Yisrael Beytenu's fortunes are bound to improve. And that secular proportion will indeed recede, unless, of course, the rules of the game change -- which is precisely what Lieberman has in mind.

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