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Military Might and Demographic Destiny

CURIOUS FACT: Both the young David Ben-Gurion, the leader of the Zionist Left and, eventually, Israel's founding prime minister, and Yitzhak Shamir, Israel's right-wing sixth prime minister, who had co-headed the Lehi, the pre-state terrorist organization known to the British as the Stern Gang, idolized Vladimir Ilyich Lenin as a role model and paragon of politics. Not that they admired the one-party police state that he forged or its continuous massacre and incarceration of opponents and innocents. But, in the eyes of Ben-Gurion and Shamir, Lenin had some overriding virtues: He was a successful revolutionary leader who combined strategic vision with tactical pragmatism.

But there was more to it than that. Ben-Gurion's imagination was fired by Lenin's consummate ability to translate realities of weakness—a minuscule, hunted Bolshevik Party—into astonishing power, as exemplified in that famous two-day coup, the "October Revolution," and the subsequent consolidation of the Bolshevik grip over the vast Russian Empire in acutely challenging internal and international circumstances.

Ben-Gurion saw the Zionist project in a similar light: a weak, minuscule movement surrounded by a sea of enemies and, beyond it, by an ocean of Gentile indifference. The Zionists were bent on achieving a territorial-demographic revolution while, at the same time, transforming the Jew's nature, place, and image in the world. From the start, Ben-Gurion envisioned himself as the leader who would bring this transformation about. The key to success, as in Lenin's case, was *power*. So, from his arrival in Palestine in 1906, Ben-Gurion set about amassing power for himself, for the Zionist movement, for the Labor wing of that movement (specifically, his Mapai Party), and after 1948, for the state that he founded. He was inimitably successful; this was his genius.

Almost from the moment he stepped ashore in Jaffa, this young, diminutive Polish Jew began to forge power bases, committee by committee, organization by organization, battalion by battalion. By 1930, he had established the party that was to win him the reborn nation's leadership; by 1935, he controlled the Yishuv's main political institution, the Jewish Agency for Palestine, which he effectively turned into a state within a state alongside the British Mandate government; and by 1948, as Israel's prime minister and defense minister—and he was always both, save for a brief hiatus from 1953 to 1955—he commanded the newborn state and its (relatively) effective army, the Israel Defense Forces (IDF). After 1948, he arrogated to himself more and more powers, paradoxically becoming an authoritarian premier within a coalition-governed democracy, until a quiet, creeping rebellion within Mapai ousted him in 1963.

The degree to which Ben-Gurion concerned himself with power's minutiae during that half a century and more has continuously astounded historians and biographers who have explored his life in recent decades. For example, his diary for 1947–1949—while the 650,000-person Yishuv/Israel was fighting for its life against tremendous odds (first Palestinian Arab militias, then invading Arab

states' armies), and while he was busy setting up the agencies and institutions of state and battling for recognition and acceptance in the international community — contains multiple long, detailed entries about munitions shipments, such as how many 7.62mm and 9mm caliber bullets arrived yesterday, or which military officer was to accompany the team negotiating an armistice agreement.

As it turned out, the dual, sequential victories over the Palestine Arabs (they were not yet called "Palestinians") and the Arab states in 1948 failed to radically alter the Arab world's view that Zionism's momentary success was but a fluke of history and that Arab numbers would ultimately "adjust" reality, prevail, and reverse the humiliation of the Nakba. So the key to Israel's survival and prosperity, as Ben-Gurion saw it, was not diplomacy and negotiated compromises, but raw power: Israel would browbeat its neighbors until they understood that the "iron wall," in Ze'ev Jabotinsky's phrase, that Ben-Gurion had managed to construct was unassailable. They would ultimately have to bend, if not bow, to force majeure.

Israel's enemies offered continuous provocations that could be exploited. During the 1950s, Arab infiltrators, most of them Palestinian refugees, crossed the borders into Israel in the thousands, bent on returning to their homes, harvesting crops, robbery, and, occasionally, murder. The IDF, honed during the skirmishes with the marauders, periodically retaliated, at first against specific offenders or the villages from which they set out, and then against the police forces and armies of the states that harbored them: Jordan, Egypt, and Syria. In the end, in 1956, when Egypt began to arm with modern Soviet-made heavy weapons, Ben-Gurion launched the ultimate retaliatory (but also preemptive) strike, the Sinai Campaign of October–November 1956, in which the Egyptian divisions in the peninsula were destroyed. Ben-Gurion had demonstrated that Israel was not to be trifled with. To further assure this, Ben-Gurion secretly engaged with the French to help build Israel's nuclear-weapons production facility, the Dimona nuclear reactor, believing that this ultimate manifestation of raw power, never really hidden from view, would deter the Arab world and assure Israel's longevity.

Alas, the Arabs remained unpersuaded. A decade later, Egypt's president, Gamal Abdel Nasser, the Arab world's leader, threw the dice once more, provoking Israel's stunning assault on his air force and armored divisions. All were wiped out, as were the air forces and ground troops of Syria and Jordan, which had joined the fray believing Nasser's mendacious boasts that his armies were advancing on Tel Aviv. In those six days in June 1967, Israel convincingly demonstrated that the state and army that Ben-Gurion had fashioned were overwhelmingly powerful.

Israel went on to win a few more wars, in 1973 against Egypt and Syria, and in 1982 against the PLO and the Syrian forces in Lebanon. But the Middle East, along with the rest of the world, had changed, and just as American might had proved unpersuasive in Vietnam (and later in Iraq and Afghanistan), so Israeli conventional and unconventional military power was to prove unconvincing in the new world of non-state agents and asymmetrical conflict. Israelis had long believed that "the Arabs only understand the language of force." (The Arabs, incidentally, were said to hold exactly the same view about the Israelis.) Ariel ("Arik") Sharon, Israel's defense minister and the architect of the 1982 Lebanon War, was purported to have said that if force proved insufficient, then one need only apply still greater force.

But force didn't really work in Lebanon, certainly not for the long term — as the Party of God, Hezbollah, demonstrated in spades. A fundamentalist Shiite guerrilla and terrorist organization, Hezbol-

lah proved during the following decades that Israel's conventional military prowess was insufficient, ultimately even useless, against a hostile population led by fanatical, self-sacrificing religious believers. Israel kept killing the guerrillas, but the supply was endless. The slums of Beirut and Tyre and Nabatieh provided more recruits than Hezbollah could handle, especially with guaranteed monthly paychecks from Iran. The struggle of attrition that unfolded sapped Israel's staying power, and when protesting Israeli mothers joined the public-relations fray, it was all over. In his final months in office in 2000, Prime Minister Ehud Barak pulled the last Israeli troops out of Lebanon.

Taking a leaf out of Hezbollah's book, the Palestinians also began testing Israel's staying power through asymmetrical warfare. They proved less successful than their Lebanese models, partly because in Israel proper, the Jewish public viewed the battle as existential: It was about the fate of the state and the Land of Israel, not about the godforsaken hills of southern Lebanon. Significantly, the Palestinian fundamentalists also proved far less courageous and effective than their Lebanese counterparts. The Israeli security services discovered that it was infinitely easier to recruit informers and agents among the Palestinians, including the fundamentalist Sunni Hamas, than among the Lebanese Shiites.

The guerrilla or terrorist mini-war that the Palestinians of the occupied territories waged against Israel intermittently during the past four decades, most dramatically during the intifadas of 1987–1991 and 2000–2004, was ultimately unsuccessful. Yes, Hamas established itself in Gaza and ultimately ejected the Israeli settlers and army from that narrow coastal enclave, and the Palestinian National Authority under Mahmoud Abbas established itself in the West Bank. But at the same time, Israel tightened its hold on East Jerusalem with new, enveloping neighborhoods, and hundreds of thousands of new settlers, with accompanying infrastructure, consolidated the country's grip on the West Bank.

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But here's the rub: Israeli military power and its repeated exercise, most recently in the 11-day mini-war against Hamas in Gaza in May 2021, has failed to change the basic realities and variables of the conflict. The Palestinian problem is not going away. In an earlier age, military power could have translated into reality-changing power and trumped demography, especially by mass expulsion. But this has not been an option in the world since 1948, at least not for non-superpowers.

In fact, the opposite has occurred. As time passes, the demographic problem, as it is often referred to in Israel, has only grown more acute (though most Israelis ignore it) simply because there are more and more Palestinians, in Gaza and the West Bank, in East Jerusalem and in Israel itself. (See particularly the burgeoning numbers of Bedouin in the Negev, where there are many men with multiple wives, in violation of an Israeli law that is never applied.)

Since 1967, power has come not from the barrel of a gun, but from women's wombs. Yasser Arafat always said that it would be the Palestinian womb that would defeat Israel, and it is certainly beginning to look as if he was right, in conjunction with two additional demographic trends.

Here lies the great irony in Israel's history: Demography might

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just prove to be destiny, whatever Israel is able to achieve through military might.

During the British Mandate years of tripartite struggle, 1917–1947, Ben-Gurion and the other leaders of the Yishuv understood the power of demography. A Jewish state would or would not arise, in all or part of Palestine, depending on how many Jews could be funneled to Palestine and how quickly. The Arabs of Palestine, backed by the Arab societies around, fought tooth and nail to force London to curtail Jewish immigration. So from 1934 onward, the Yishuv began to ship Jews to Palestine illegally, alongside the limited British-approved legal immigration. In May 1939, as the Holocaust tragically drew near and upped the stakes, Britain imposed even stricter limits on immigration, and the Zionist struggle focused on bringing in the illegals. Ben-Gurion understood that this was the make-or-break issue.

But in 1948–1950, Ben-Gurion—who admittedly had a great many other problems on his mind—somehow forgot about demography. Three new realities emerged that would together shape Israel's future. First, while much of Palestine's Arab population was uprooted, the 1948 Arab–Israeli War ended with 160,000 Arabs remaining inside Israel, becoming Israeli citizens—a full fifth of the new state's population at the time. That proportion has remained steady, with Arabs today constituting 21–22% of Israel's inhabitants, *despite the arrival in the country of some 3 million new Jewish immigrants since 1949*—meaning that Israeli-Arab birth rates have been significantly higher than those of Jewish Israelis.

The same applied to the Arabs living in the Gaza Strip and the West Bank, despite the poverty prevailing in these territories and, especially, in their refugee camps. Today there are more or less an equal number of Jews and Arabs living in the area of Mandate Palestine, between the Jordan River and the Mediterranean (in all, 14–15 million souls). And, overall, Arab birth rates remain substantially higher than those of the country's Jews.

The second demographic trend that Ben-Gurion failed to understand or address was the burgeoning number of ultra-Orthodox Jews, sustained by hefty government subsidies (mainly for housing and for each additional child). In 1948, less than 1 percent of Israel's Jews were ultra-Orthodox; today, the figure hovers around 12–13%. The percentage will continue to grow: Ultra-Orthodox and Orthodox "national religious" families (the latter being the core of the West Bank settlers) have on average five to seven children apiece, while secular Israelis have two to three children per family. In addition to state subsidies, Ben-Gurion also agreed to free ultra-Orthodox youths from military service. In effect, through the various subsidies, this perpetuated their lives as Talmud students, instead of channeling them to join the labor market. This has meant that Israel's secular Jews carry an annually growing parasitic ultra-Orthodox population on their backs, a major long-term threat to the viability of the country's economy.

The third demographic trend that has affected the character of Israeli society, politics, and culture was the massive influx of Jews from Arab states from 1949 to 1964, especially those from Morocco. Zionism in the 1920s and 1930s had rested on the premise that masses of Eastern and Central European Jews would immigrate to Palestine and sustain and empower the Yishuv. The Holocaust ended this hope, and Zionist leaders reluctantly turned to Sephardi Jewry for the needed manpower. Ben-Gurion was warned that a massive Sephardi influx would alter the nature of the emergent Jewish state (in short, "orientalize" it). At first, the government tried to limit the intake through "selective" *aliyah*. But

in the end, Ben-Gurion and his colleagues caved to the pressures from the Arab world's Jewish communities that they themselves had generated. The gates were flung wide open.

The result was a change in the nature of Israeli society and, ultimately, starting in 1977, the ouster of Mapai/Labor Party, and the assumption of power by right-wing parties, headed by Herut/ Likud, whose main base of support was and remains Sephardi Jewry. The Sephardi *olim* had at first voted for the governing left-wing parties that had "redeemed" them from the discrimination and oppression of the Arab societies amid which they had lived. But subsequently, Herut's Menachem Begin and, more recently, Benjamin Netanyahu successfully incited them and their descendants against the Left (the "Ashkenazim") that, according to their selective collective memory, had treated them poorly when their forefathers landed in the country. This incitement was coupled with Sephardi antagonism toward the Arab world—in effect, toward Arabs—that has sustained their right-wing voting patterns. Thus Ben-Gurion had brought about the political demise of his own Labor Party.

Over the past decades, in every area that affects Israeli–Palestinian relations, raw military power has been supplanted by raw demographic power. Periodic military blows are of no lasting avail in neutralizing the Palestinian threat to the Israeli state and to Israeli democracy, which is gradually being eroded and recast both internally and externally as a two-tier society between the river and the sea. The erosion of democracy lies at the base of the gradually diminishing support for Israel in the West, including in the United States, as the possibility of a two-state compromise recedes.

At the same time, the ultra-Orthodox (and Orthodox) womb is gradually but dramatically eating away at the secular and open nature of Israeli society. The right-wing politics of Israel's Orthodox and, increasingly, ultra-Orthodox communities—which are gradually transforming from anti-nationalist to ultra-nationalist—is coupling with the anti-Arab worldview of the Likud's Sephardi pow-

er-base to render the possibility of accommodation with the Arab world, and especially the Palestinians, ever more remote.

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"What is to be done?" asked Lenin in his famous 1902 pamphlet of that name, in effect launching the Bolshevik Party that was to win governance over Russia 15 years later. What can be done in Israel to roll back or at least limit the consequences of the demographic challenges that threaten the state's essentially secular, democratic, Jewish character and very existence?

The first thing would be to tackle the haredi problem. Theoretically, though not politically or practically speaking, this is the simplest to "solve." There is broad agreement among secular Israelis of both the Right and the Left, who still constitute the majority among Israeli Jews, that the country is drifting if not into full-blown theocracy, then into a state of absolute dependence on the haredi parties in the formation and conduct of government. This agreement needs to be translated into legislation that would force the government-subsidized haredi schools to teach their kids the basic intellectual disciplines—mathematics, science, English, and history—and parallel legislation that would deny the haredim the subsidies that enable them to have large families without their adult men ever seeing the inside of a workplace.

Similarly, the secular Likud and the swathe of center and right- and left-wing parties must agree to pass a law forcing haredi 18- to 20-year-olds to do national service, if not in the military, then in the state's civilian bureaucracies or in local government. Such reforms in education and in national service would pave the way for integration of haredi men in the economy and society. Many Jews of the national-religious persuasion, who have always been resentful of the passes the haredim have enjoyed with regard to national service and economic parasitism, would go along with this.

More complicated, theoretically at least, would be the fuller

integration of Israel's Arab minority, many of whose youngsters rioted in the streets of Israel's mixed Arab-Jewish cities during the recent Israel–Gaza hostilities. Over the past decade, Israeli-Arab birth rates overall have steadily gone down, almost to the level of secular Jewish families (except among the Negev's 200,000-strong Bedouin population). But the schools in the Arab sector — with the exception of Christian Arab schools — are generally below par, with rote learning being the rule rather than the exception. Money needs to be invested in the education of Arabs in teacher-training programs to gradually raise the level of the Arab-minority school system. (Most of the Arab students I taught at Ben-Gurion University couldn't put together a correct Hebrew, let alone English, sentence.)

Money also needs to be invested in training young adult Arabs, among whom unemployment is high, for jobs in the increasingly technological Israeli economy. Policing must increase in the Arab towns, where crime is a threat and large criminal gangs run car-theft rings, protection rackets, drugs, and weapons smuggling. The murder rate in Israeli-Arab towns is hundreds of percentage points higher than in wholly Jewish towns. Overall, the government must direct resources to reducing Israeli Arabs' sense of alienation, and this should start with a repeal of the nationality or nation-state law (*Khok Ha-Le'Om*) enacted by Netanyahu's government in 2018, which managed to anger Israel's traditionally loyal, IDF-serving Druze community and Christian Arabs, as well as the Muslim Arab minority, while contributing nothing to enhancing the country's "Jewishness."

I have no easy "solution" for the general Israeli–Palestinian problem or for the future of the West Bank, Gaza, and East Jerusalem. Both sides have contributed to the evisceration of a possible two-state compromise, initially courtesy of Arab rejectionism, but subsequently through Jewish settlement policy and unilateral annexationism. It is possible that an easing of restrictions on the Gaza Strip's Arabs, reinforced by development projects that would provide jobs to its hundreds of thousands of unemployed — such as building airports and seaports, and energy and desalination plants — might reduce tensions and hatreds. Easing restrictions on movement inside the West Bank and between the West Bank and Israel might also help, though the danger of terrorism will necessarily curtail such efforts. In the end, a possible confederation of Jordan, the West Bank, and the Gaza Strip, involving some measure of Arab sovereignty in East Jerusalem, might provide an avenue to exit the Israel–Palestine conflict. But this is for the distant future and visionaries.

If acted upon, the foregoing suggestions or proposals, while not canceling out the demographic threats to Israel and its democracy that I have outlined, would go some way toward mitigating their consequences, or at least slowing down their realization, perhaps recovering some of the power to effect real change that Israel has lost in recent decades.   ✳