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THE INFLUENCE OF DOMESTIC POLITICS IN ISRAEL ON THE CONFLICT

by Ilan Pappe

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It was the former secretary of state, Henry Kissinger, who said that Israel does not have a foreign policy but only a domestic policy. What he meant by that was that, unlike other countries, the end result of Israel's policy towards the conflict in Palestine, is determined by domestic interests and not an overall strategy.

This is true to a point. Domestic developments in Israel, ever since the creation of the state had a very considerable impact on the Israeli policy towards the Arab world and the Palestinians, and hence influenced the conflict as a whole. But it is also true, that there was and is a basic consensual Zionist conceptualization of the conflict which affects policies no less than fluctuations inside the local political system.

One domestic issue stands out in its impact on the conflict, and I suggest devoting to it most of this article. This is the tense relationship between the Jewish majority and the Palestinian minority in Israel. No other domestic problem affected the conflict for such a long time and in such a significant manner. Therefore I will focus on it, while adding in the end some other, but by all means much more minor issues to the end of this piece. But first let us overview the domestic scene since the inception of the state in 1948.

A General View on the Domestic Map

The domestic political scene in Israel in early years (up to 1967) reflected very much the political map of the mandatory period (1918-1948). The dominating power was the Zionist Labour movement, which founded the Zionist project and its leaders headed and brought it to the successful completion in 1948. Therefore in many ways, its platform and agenda became that of the state of Israel. It succeeded in embodying the Zionist consensus on every aspect of life. This is an important point to remember, as we shall see that in the beginning of the 21st century there will be a yearning for such a political forces, and the newest party on the scene, Kadima, would represent this consensus, or at least, will attempt to do it.

This consensus can be summed up in simple terms as a wish to create a democratic Jewish state over most of mandatory Palestine, while trying to cleanse it from as many Palestinians as possible. The main concern on the agenda was thus demographic balance between the Jews and the Palestinians in what became the state of Israel in 1948.

The dramatic events of 1948 – the British decision to leave and the UN proposal to partition Palestine that was rejected by the Palestinians – provided the opportunity for the Labour movement to move ahead with its ambition, even before the state was established. In between February 1948 and January 1949, the Jewish forces carried out ethnic cleansing operations, while fighting at the same time invading Arab units, sent by neighboring states, in an attempt to foil the creation of the Jewish state. The Arab military effort was not significant enough to stop the creation of the state, nor could it save half of Palestine's

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native population that was expelled by force in those months.

The war ended with the Jewish state stretching over almost 80% of Palestine and within it lived a small Palestinian minority – around 100,00 people were left in those areas and they were joined by another 60,000 as a result of annexation to Israel of more territory in the West Bank, as part of an agreement with Jordan. They constituted around 16% of the population.

As noted, the presence of these Arabs, the Palestinian minority of Israel, was one typical domestic issue – of minority-majority relationship, that impacted the conflict. In fact, it will not be an exaggeration to claim that through this issue one can understand fully the link between internal and external politics in Israel and moreover, have an insight into the impact of the past on the conflict's present and future developments.

The 'Demographic Problem'

'Sea, Land, Sea' was a popular and unconventional show put by two Israeli theaters in 2003. It was staged as a cabaret that enabled glimpses into the daily worries of Israelis in one of the country's most desperate year in its history. In one of the sketches, a young man reveals to his girlfriend he was recruited by the Mossad to become a stud, who is entrusted with the enjoyable mission of ensuring the demographic survival of the Jewish people in Israel. He has to help and bring to the world as many Jewish babies as possible to confront the 'demographic danger' posed by the Palestinian presence on the land.

This macabre scene has a serious twist to it. It is not incidental that the Mossad would be conceived to be the institution that would face the demographic problem. The play was written on the eve of the previous Israeli elections when the 'demographic problem' was the major issue in it – as it has been in the present campaign of 2006. The 'demographic problem', declared Benjamin Netanyahu back then, 'is the most serious problem on Israel's agenda'.[1] All the other leading figures in the Israeli political system concurred. Ariel Sharon, who was about to win those elections, proposed the pull out from Gaza as the best answer to the 'demographic problem'. The leaders of the Labour party propagated the apartheid Wall as the best means of limiting the number of Palestinians inside Israel. And the center party, Shinui, supported fully both the pullout and the wall. So the Mossad, as well as any other body connected with formulating Israel's national security policy dealt indeed with 'the strategic threat of the demographic problem' as it is defined nowadays by Israel's minister of Defence, Shaul Mofaz.[2] Surely, the agencies and think tanks at the top were not hiring fertile potent young Jews to do the job, but were instead exploring more sinister means for dealing with the 'demographic danger inside Israel'. Their secret plans are hidden in their drawers and hopefully would stay there, even if we may   not learn about them in the future. But we do know what are the concerns and worries of mainstream Israel about the issue and how politicians suggest to deal with it, should they be in power. Their ability to convince the electorate of their genuine anxiety about 'Israel's demographic problem' and their willingness to offer at least guidelines of how to deal with it, was the prime issue of the recent 2006 elections. From Left to Right, the platform of the Zionist parties contained a reference of how best to counter 'the demographic problem'. Ex-parliamentary groups such as the Geneva accord movement, the Peace Now Movement, the

Council for Peace and Security, Ami Ayalon's Census group and the Mizrachi Democratic Rainbow all promised too their prospective supporters that their schema would solve the 'demographic problem'.

It will pay at this juncture to redefine Right and Left in Israel in the context of the demographic issue. With demise of the Oslo accord, the known configurations of the Israeli political system were gone. The Right wing, represented by the Likkud, accepted through the Oslo years that parts of the occupied territories do not have to rule directly and was persuaded by the more hawkish wing of Labour that it pays to be dovish on the territories so as to become hawkish towards the Palestinians in Israel itself. The Left wing, represented by Labour, realized that the Israeli public tended to regard large parts of the West Bank as an integral part of Israel and therefore there was no need to contemplate a full withdrawal. In 1994 this movement to the center by both parties produced several documents that indicated clearly the disappearing gap between the two movements that once polarized the system.

With the outbreak of the second Intifada and the total collapse of the Left, it was even easier to establish a Labour-Likkud consensus. Labour joined eagerly the two Sharon governments and the way was open in 2006 for the formation a joint party – leaving both Labour and Likkud in shambles. Right became now in Israel only extreme positions against the consensual take on the demographic reality: the need to have as much of the territory with as few Palestinians on it as possible.

This realization on the Right began with Benjamin Netanyahu who signed the Wye agreement in 1996, which was the first move by an Israeli government of withdrawing from an area just because it had not Jewish presence in it (the Palestinian areas of the city of Hebron) and continued with Ariel Sharon's pullout from Gaza plan of 2004. Both plans were fully supported by the Labour party. It was only natural that on the basis of this platform – withdrawing from Palestinian population centers – one could form a new party. Kadima was indeed founded when it was clear that on the issue of the demographic question there were no more differences of opinion between Likkud and Labour and as there were no divergence of opinion on any other issue, the electorate would want to see a joint party.

The demographic issue in 2006 became a winning card. Apart from the members of the Palestinian parties (nine) and two eccentric Ashkenazi ultra orthodox Jews, the rest of 109 out of the 120 members of the local parliament were sent to the Knesset with the promise of advancing their respective magic formula for solving the 'demographic problem' of Israel. The means varied from shrinking Israeli control over the occupied territories (in fact withdrawing from only 50 percent of these territories according to Labour, Kadima, the Sepharadic Orthodox and the pensioners' party) to taking more drastic action. The latter direction was proposed by Right wing parties such as the Russian ethnic party of Avigdor Liberman and the national religious parties. They preached for a voluntary transfer of Palestinians into the West Bank.. In short, the Zionist answer to the demographic danger, as manifested in the 2006 elections, is that you diminish the size of 'The Problem' either by giving up territory or by decreasing dramatically the 'problematic' population.

The plethora of ideas was propagated before. Transfer as well as withdrawal were considered in the past legitimate means in dealing with 'the problem'; identified as the major hurdle on the way of Zionist fulfillment already in the late 19th century. David Ben-

Gurion told the Zionist leadership in December 1947 that ' there will be no viable or stable Jewish state if the Jews constitute only 60% of the population'; the Zionist leadership, he warned on the same occasion, would have to deal with this 'severe' problem with 'a new approach in due course'.[3] Well, it was a short course and in the next year he oversaw the ethnic cleansing of the Palestinians who became less than 20% of the Jewish state's overall population. Interestingly, but not surprisingly, Netanyahu in December 2003 on a pubic stage which became in the 21st century the ultimate podium for Israeli leaders for airing their strategic visions and long term plans – the private university of Herzeliya – resorted to similar insinuations. He recycled Ben-Gurion's magic number - the undesirable 60%. Netanyahu said: 'If the Arabs in Israel will be 40% of the population this is the end of the Jewish state'. 'But also 20% is a problem', he warned, 'if the relationship with these 20% are problematic, the state is entitled to employ extreme measures'. He did not elaborate further on the question.[4]

The Palestinians in Israel are nearly 20% today and Ehud Olmert thinks that in 2020, if Israel stays in the occupied territories, the Palestinians would outnumber the Jews. So he advocates HITKANSUT – literally Convergence but here more in the meaning of ingathering. Leaving several populated Palestinian areas out of direct Israeli control. But if this consolidation takes place, even an amateur demographer understands there will still be a very large Palestinian population inside the 88% of Palestine on which Olmert wishes to build the future stable Jewish State. How many exactly we do not know: demographers in Israel belonging to Center and Left belittle the number so that disengagement would seem as a reasonable solution to the 'problem', while opponents, especially from the Right tend to exaggerate the percentage. But they all seem to agree this is not a static demographic balance given the higher natural growth of Palestinians compared to Jews. And thus, Olmert, like Ben-Gurion and Netanyahu before him, would probably seek other means to solve the 'problem', when he finds out that pull outs are not a solution.

In fact, it is possible to argue that pullout was not meant to solve the demographic problem. It was among other things away of allaying American concerns, and especially British ones, that a total deadlock on the Palestine issues complicates further, their already highly strained relationship with the Arab world. So the unilateral withdrawal was successfully marketed as a peace initiative. Moreover, as the Israeli consensus about the Jewish State's final borders consolidates, the Gaza deal is provided with the hope of fending off any outside pressure, or intervention, in the Israeli future plan for large annexations in the West Bank.

So what are the lineaments of the 'demographic problem' in Israel? The frenzy atmosphere of 2003 allowed many mainstream journalists, academics and politicians in Israel to liberate themselves from early inhibitions when talking about the 'demographic problem'. Who was included in it and what was its nature were clear enough issues – needing no explanation in the domestic scene. They required some elaboration outside Israel but once the 'Arabs' in Israel and the Palestinians in the occupied territories were associated in the public and western mind with 'Muslims' it was easy to elicit support for the demographic policies, at least where it counted: on Capitol hill. But even in Europe there was no need for further explanation why Israel has a 'demographic problem' after the 9/11 attacks in the USA. The popular daily Maarive carried on 2 February 2003 a typical and alarming headline in oversized red letters: 'A quarter of the children in Israel are Muslims'. And in

order to accentuate the association between explosions and Muslims the piece went on to describe this fact as Israel's next 'ticking bomb'. So the natural growth of 'Muslims' – 2.4% a year – was not a problem anymore it became a danger.

Leading articles in other newspapers and discussions in talk-shows repeated the same message in those frantic days of 2003. Defining Palestinians in Israel as 'ticking bombs' and a 'problem' seemed a reasonable discourse to public figures as well to laymen in the street. The open debate in that year clarified that two groups of Palestinians were part of the 'demographic problem' – the Palestinian citizens of Israel, constituting close to 20% of the population and any Palestinians incorporated in Israel as part of the unilateral annexation of large chunks of the occupied territories. Both groups enjoyed in theory the liberty of elections and voting, but were barred from transactions in land, denied budgets for education and welfare as well as infrastructures for normal life – such as the one that could have saved the lives of 5 Palestinians in Wadi Ara who drowned in the big floods that swamped their villages early this month.

In 1897, WE Burghardt De Bois wrote that 'being a problem was a strange experience' – strange being here a euphemism for the daily tribulations of being an African American victim of slavery and bigotry. Similarly, the Palestinians in Israel experience their problematic essence through the daily humiliations meted at them by whoever represents the powers that be.[5]

In the years that followed the 2003 elections, on the way to the present campaign, the Israeli pundits who wrote often on the question liked to use a language that is akin to that employed in Europe and the United Sates in debates over the future of immigration. A legitimate subject from Left to Right in the West as it poses questions relating to the availability of resources – such as employment and national budgets – to the indigenous population. The result of the debate in Europe was a series of policies and laws, reflecting a certain uneasy golden mean between human rights' concerns and national patriotism. But these discussions are hardly relevant to the 'problem' in Israel. In the Jewish state, it is the immigrant community that debates the future of the indigenous population and not vice versa. The case is not of immigrants coming into a new state, but rather of a state the immigrated into the lives of the native people of Palestine. Hence the discourse of 'immigration policy' is totally irrelevant here. In fact, the vocabulary prevalent in Israel about the 'problem' echoes disturbingly similar discourses in colonialist projects or worse reverberates voices heard in the heart of Europe during the 1930s, when indigenous Europeans were regarded as a peril to civilization and their removal was preached as the only road to progress and salvation. In the beginning of 1948 (7 February 1948) while driving to Jerusalem from Tel-Aviv and witnessing the first Palestinian villages that were cleansed in the western outskirts of Jerusalem, a jubilant Ben-Gurion reported to a gathering of Zionist leaders: 'When I come nowadays to Jerusalem I feel it is a Hebrew city. This was a feeling I only had in farms and in Tel-Aviv. Not all Jerusalem is Hebraic but there is already a huge Hebraic bloc – no Arabs in it. One hundred percent Jewish'. This was the result of the early ethnic cleansing operations in 1948 and Ben-Grunion added, 'if we can persevere' this miracle would happen elsewhere.[6]

But despite the perseverance, a sizeable community of Palestinians remained and they are the members of the 'demographic problem'. They sit as students in classes in my university where they can attend lectures by professors who talk abut the grave 'demographic

problem' Israel has and they know that the distinguished professors talk about them. The lecturers tell them they can not have too many children unless they would risk transforming from being a 'problem' into becoming a 'danger'. Palestinian law students – the lucky ones to cross an informal quota – would meet in the Hebrew University the celebrated human rights' Professor Ruti Gabison who would justify past and present Israeli practices in dealing with the 'problem'.[7] Gabison, a former head of the Civil Rights Association in Israel and a candidate for the Supreme court, has come out recently with certain strong views on the subject of the 'demographic problem' in Israel; views that probably reflect in her eyes a consensual Israeli understanding of how to deal with the problem. 'Israel has the right to control the Palestinian natural growth' she declared in interviews and conferences. Away from the campuses, like De Bois, they will not be able the escape the discourse of 'being a problem'. From the Zionist Left to hard core Right they would hear daily how the Jewish society aches in its wish to get rid of them. And they would worry, and rightly so, whenever, a suggestion would emerge that they became a 'danger'. While only being a 'problem' they were protected by certain pretense for democracy and liberalism. When they constitute a 'danger' they could be faced with emergency policies, based on the notorious British mandatory emergency regulations. An old colonialist logic, in force in Israel and territories, that allows the government to scorn and renounce any respect or concern for human and civil rights. Houses can be demolished, newspapers shut and people expelled under such a regime.

The 2006 elections have thus brought to the Knesset a solid Jewish coalition determined to deal with the demographic problem – first and foremost by disengaging from more Palestinian territories in the West Bank. Secondly, and of equal importance, by completing the network of walls around the rest of the Palestinian areas. The border between Israel and the West Bank is 370 KMs long, but the wall will be double its length, as its serpentine arms will strangulate large Palestinian communities. This monstrous structure leaves not an iota of land for green lungs or margins of any kind so that Israel can have the territory without the people. Inside the Palestinian areas of Israel, the segregation is ensured by construction programs already approved in Sharon's term in office as minister of national infrastructures, years ago, of Jewish community centers overlooking and encircling large Palestinian areas such as Wadi Ara and the lower Galilee.

Even before the elections, the previous coalition showed its determination to deal with the 'demographic problem' before it became a 'danger'. On 31 July, 2003, the Knesset passed a law that prohibits Palestinians spouses from obtaining citizenship, permanent residency or temporary one, by marrying an Israeli citizen. This was a response to what the Israelis called family reunification, a long process that brought together in wedlock Palestinians on both side of the Green Line. The initiator was the liberal Zionist, Avraham Poraz of Shinui. He called it a 'defence measure'. Only 25 members of Knesset opposed it out of 120 and Poraz declared that those already married and with families, regardless of how long they already lived in Israel 'will have to go to the West Bank'. The Law violates and abuses several charters and covenants of human rights – but this of course never deterred Israel in the past.

The Arab members of Knesset were among those appealing to the Supreme Court of justice against the racist law. When the Supreme Court justified the law, the energy of these members of Knesset petered out. They come from three parties: the communist party in

coalition with other forces, the national party of Azmi Bishara and a united list centered on the more pragmatic branch of the Islamic movement. The ruling of the Supreme Court silenced their protest against this measure. Their dismissal by the High court indicated their irrelevance in the eyes of both the parliamentary and judicial systems in the state.

At the dead of night of 24 January 2006, an elite unit of the border police sized the Israeli Palestinian village of Jajulya. The special troops burst into houses dragging out 36 women – tearing them from their children, babies and husbands and eventually choosing eight of them for deportation. They were thrown in one of the coldest night that year at a checkpoint and ordered to go to their original homes in the West Bank. Some were married for years with Palestinians in Jaljulya, some were pregnant, but the tough soldiers were implementing with precision the Law of Separation, showing the Israeli Jewish public that when a 'demographic problem' becomes a danger, the state acts swiftly and without hesitations. One Palestinian member of Knesset protested, but the action was approved by the government, the courts and the media.

In the new Knesset, the Palestinian parties hardly made it and have only nine members between themselves. They are not included in any coalition calculation and are likely to be sidelined and forgotten as they were in the previous one. And no wonder; never before were they so ignored. Haaretz sent a 'brave' journalist to live for few days in the 'Arab areas' to give a view - as a tourist anthropologist - on the Palestinians' reaction to the elections. Apart from this bizarre piece of reportage, the Israeli media did not include in its analyses the Palestinian vote. After all, the Palestinians are the problem, not the solution. And if disengagement would not 'stop' the natural growth of Palestinians – and why should it – then the Jaljulya operation could show the way into the future.

Part of the problem of the Palestinian minority is its internal fragmentation. In the past, one could attribute this dismal situation to the Israeli 'divide and rule' policies that drove wedges between various groups and forces. But today, one can see that the inability to present a unified position is more connected to a crisis of orientation and leadership. The double marginality in both communities obfuscates the civil issues with the national aspirations. The introduction of an Islamic agenda, confused matters even further. This ideological disarray lies over a society where the politics of clans still plays a crucial role in the rural areas. This last phenomenon affects more municipal politics than national ones, but it frustrates the ability to form a united national leadership, which is what the Palestinian minority needs desperately at this moment.

No wonder there is now a vociferous call inside the Palestinian civil society in Israel – from leading NGOs - to the international community to interfere in its affairs. But if Israel ignored the ruling of the international court on the wall, would it be moved by what it will fend off as intervention in its internal affairs? There is another call coming, still hesitantly but it will gather momentum, from this forgotten Palestinian community of Israelis: to create an autonomous Parliament for the Palestinians in Israel. In a world that double marginalized this community – both in the general Palestinian polity and within the Jewish society - it seems the 1,300,000 Palestinian citizens of Israel have very little to loose by shunning the Knesset and opting for autonomy. Who knows they may even convince the Jewish majority by this that the are 'only' a problem, not a danger.

What all this means that because of the Israeli wish to have a demographic majority it will never withdraw from all the West Bank and that there will never be a genuine Palestinian

state in the occupied territories. And without these two components there will never be a solution to the conflict. But no less important, even if Israel withdraws from most of the West Bank, which it is not likely to do, and even in the occupied areas there is an Authority which Israel and the West like, as long as the demographic policies of the state persist, the Palestinian refugees would not be allowed to return and the Palestinian minority in the state would not be integrated. These two forgotten Palestinian communities' agenda and aspirations would continue to fuel the conflict.[8]

Conclusion

The three issues I have mentioned: the demographic question, the cultural identity and the militarization are key domestic factors that orientate the Israeli policy towards the conflict. Since Israel is the strongest side in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict the impact of these three factors will determine the future of this conflict. However, the fact that in recent years the Arab world around Israel, and the Muslim world in the more distant circle have been relatively disinterested in the conflict does not mean that they will not be in the future. Their rejection of the Israeli positions and conduct affects not only the future of the conflict in the Middle East but can influence the stability of the world at large.

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[1] *Yediot Acharonot*, 17 December 2003
[2] A speech in front of the Council for Peace and Security, 25 November 2003.
[3] Quoted in his Diary, 3 December 1947.
[4] See note 1.
[5] W. E. B De Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk,* New York: Dover Publications 1994.
[6] G. Rivlin and E. Orren (eds.), *The War of Independence; Ben-Gurion's Diary*, IDF Publication: Tel-Aviv 1982, Volume 1, 7 February, 1948, p. 210-211.
[7] *Haaretz*, 1 December 2005
[8] A general background is provided by Uri Davis, *Apartheid Israel: Possibilities for Struggle From Within,* London: Zed Books, 2003.