

# The threat from within

Israel is about to face what may prove the greatest threat that it has yet encountered during its 35 years of turbulent existence. This threat does not come from hostile Arab neighbors nor even from the economy, whose state was recently described by a government minister as "catastrophic." Israel's newest challenge arises from the iron law of demographics.

Today, Israel contains 3.2 million Jews and 700,000 Arabs within its original pre-1967 war borders. But Israel's seizure of the West Bank, Golan and Gaza have added another 1.5 million Palestinians, raising the Arab population total of "greater Israel" to 56%. This percentage is even higher when the 200,000 Israelis who have moved to the United States are deducted from the total.

## Become an Arab state

According to Israeli government demographic studies, pre-1967-War-Israel will, by 1998, have an absolute Arab majority. The Jewish birth rate is dropping and Israel is experiencing a net outflow of citizens while the Arab birthrate is rising rapidly. So, if Israel annexes the occupied lands, it will immediately have an Arab majority; even if it does not, in 15 years Israel proper may become an Arab state with a large Jewish minority.

This inexorable trend was addressed recently in the *New York Times* by Rabbi Kahane of the Jewish Defence League, Israel's most extreme right-wing group. Kahane, citing this demographic imperative, asserted that Israel could not remain both a democracy and a Jewish state. If Israel were to remain a democracy, it would have to give the vote to its Arab inhabitants who, upon attaining a majority, would take political power and so end the Jewish nature of the state.

Kahane's solution is to abjure democracy, maintain the Jewish ethos at all costs and to expel the Arabs from Israel, a solution that reeks of Nazi Germany. This view is, of course, rejected by a majority of Israelis. But the government of Prime Minister Begin appears to be following a course that might, at least in part, satisfy Rabbi Kahane.

The Begin government is clearly intent upon colonizing the West Bank, Gaza and Golan as rapidly as possible. In what has been described by the Israeli press as a Wild West atmosphere, former Arab land is being sold at bargain prices to gun-toting Jewish settlers whose vigilante tactics have been harshly condemned in Israel. What will Israel do with the 1.5 million Arabs in these territories?

It appears to many that Israel may have to adopt a South African solution: Denying the vote and true political power to the Arab majority while retaining it for the Jewish minority. Such a policy, totally inconsonant with Israel's democratic tradition, would make Israel an international pariah in a world where already more nations recognize the PLO than the government in Jerusalem. Apartheid in Israel would also ensure that continuing hostility with neighboring states; guerrilla action by Palestinians in Israel would become inevitable.

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There is, however, a temporary solution to this seeming dilemma. Ori Bernstein of Israel's Peace Now movement expresses it simply. "As long as Israel stays within her pre-1967 borders she can remain a democracy and a Jewish state. But if Begin insists on holding on to the conquered territories, it will mean the end of the Jewish state and the end of the Zionist dream."

Bernstein's contention is probably correct — at least for 15 more years: Before the 1967 war, Israel's 700,000 Arabs lived peacefully with their Jewish neighbors, enjoying most democratic rights and a growing integration into Israeli society — a tolerance, one should add, often not given to Jews in Arab lands. But the addition of 1.5 million radicalized, pro-PLO Palestinians from the West Bank and Gaza will inevitably spread restiveness among Israel's original Arab citizens and compel Israel to adopt ever more repressive measures. If this were to happen, Israel, the only democracy in the Middle East, might well follow Arthur Koestler's prediction by turning into a "nasty little Sparta."

## Defence 30% of GNP

Israelis of all political hues are now wrestling with this truly awesome question. The majority of Israelis don't want to give up the captured territories; but they also would not contemplate changing Israel's democratic structure. Equally important, Israel's continuing net emigration demonstrates that its citizens, and particularly the younger ones who do not share the old Zionist elan, are growing increasingly tired of endless wars and the growing economic problems of living in a country that spends close to 30% of its Gross National Product on defence.

The outcome of this vital debate will influence the future of the entire Middle East as well as the relations of the great powers. If Israel somehow decides to remain a Jewish and democratic state by giving up the captured territories, an overall settlement of the Palestinian problem and peace with Israel's neighbors could be within reach. The very real and persistent threat of a clash between Russia and America over the Middle East would also be enormously reduced. But if Israel elects to annex the conquered territories and create Greater Israel, then the prospect could well be more decades of war and terrorism — a psychological environment in which even the hardiest democracy would be placed in peril.

*(Eric Margolis, a member of the Canadian Institute of Strategic Studies, writes frequently on international affairs)*