

An inconvenient truth
Robert Fattal Yediot 02.16.2013

Continued stalemate in peace process helps Palestinians reach their goal of demographic superiority

On December 31, 2012 the Palestinian Central Bureau of Statistics released a report on the demographics of Palestinians. Rather than going through the effort of talks with the Netanyahu government, Palestinians are now talking to all of Israel. Israelis can be forgiven for not paying much notice, given other issues like absorbing the consequences of the elections. But the Palestinians have dispensed with the usual bromide you would expect of talking about prosperity through peace, and have begun to let it slip in an official way that demographics is the inconvenient truth Israelis should be grappling with.

The potential consequences of demography on Israel have become the Palestinians' overriding strategy for national liberation. I cannot underscore this point more emphatically. If you want to know how the Palestinians are going to react to almost any major issue, then look at it through the prism of demographics and you will get your answer.

The report highlights certain statistics: That Israel's Arab population is young, with 36% under the age of 15, and that the Israeli-Arab population has a higher fertility rate than Jews, leading to the conclusion that by the end of this decade, in the area between the Jordan River and the Mediterranean, Jews will be a minority.

Although Palestinians already form a majority in Jordan, the PCBS report hardly mentions that country. The message is clear, as Palestinian Authority official Hanan Ashrawi said "If the situation carries on this way, at the end we'll be a majority, but we're giving the Israelis a chance to understand the Palestinians could have their own democratic country that would neighbor Israel." Translation: You have till the end of the decade; so either you acquiesce to all our demands now, or get prepared for new demands calling for a bi-national state later.

Ms. Ashrawi is only telling half the truth. Palestinians have always held a profound belief that all of Israel should be a future Palestine. It isn't a secret that several members of the Palestinian Authority (State of Palestine) have to varying degrees hinted that they support the establishment of one Palestinian state on all of Israel and the territories. The notion that they would seriously consider a situation where Israel would be a Jewish state in perpetuity is almost an anathema to them. For example, talk of land transfer is acceptable, but don't mention transferring any land populated by Arab-Israelis. It isn't because Abbas' interlocutors care for the rights of Arab Israelis, it's just that transferring their nationals to Palestine only helps Israel maintain its Jewish identity.

The delay in the peace process also helps the Palestinians reach their goal of demographic superiority. Viewed in this way it becomes easy to understand why delay is an excellent strategy for them. The Oslo Accords were signed 20 years ago; if they wait another 20 years the demographic situation will be intolerable for Israel. Throw into the mix an ascendant and ruthless Iranian bloc, an Egypt not so friendly to Israel, and talk of an Arab Spring in Jordan, and you have to admit that if you were a Palestinian nationalist you wouldn't want to sit down and seriously talk peace now either. In fact, you would do exactly what the Palestinians are doing - stay away from the negotiating table and wait. It certainly does help the Palestinian cause when Israel invites worldwide contempt for building settlements. I am sure that inside Ramallah's corridors of power there is quiet jubilation for settlement construction. It paints Israel as uncooperative and belligerent while relieving the Palestinians of the need to concede anything.

In fact, I find it almost treasonous for Israeli leaders to act so recklessly with the future of the Jewish nation. Our leadership is adrift with no plan (building settlements is not a plan), no ideas, and no sense of history towards the country they are sworn to protect. As Ami Ayalon, former head of Shin Bet, describes it, "You see that void (from Israel's leaders), that (...) lack of initiative, that willingness to let things take their course." Even if Israel manages to get to a negotiating table and present a serious offer it will quite

probably be rejected. Amos Yadlin, Israel's former chief of Military Intelligence, affirms that should Israel make a "fair offer, along the Clinton parameters, or the offer made by the Israeli government in 2008, we estimate that the Palestinians will reject our offer." So with the clock ticking, and a negotiated settlement unlikely, isn't it about time we try to develop a national strategy that focuses on what the Palestinians are telling us to deal with?

Convince ex-pats to return to Israel

If Israel really wants peace and a two-state solution then it needs to recognize that the Palestinians are looking at demographics as the only issue that will decide their future. Recognize that issue and address it, and there may be a way for Israel to regain some control and settle the conflict. Don't forget that after the huge immigration of Russians was well under way, Arafat signed the Oslo Accords and the first intifada ended. It was also after Russian immigration was clearly on the wane that the second intifada commenced.

So what should Israel do?

First, officially stop settlement expansion - the only exception being in the Jerusalem envelope. Building in and around Jerusalem is the only part of the West bank that the demographic balance is in Israel's favor, and quite likely is a major concern for the Palestinians. But moderate and consistent building is preferable to massive construction announcements. I think the world community would be sympathetic to the notion that Jews want to keep control of their holiest city, but only if Israel builds in and around Jerusalem and not other parts of the West Bank. If Israel does decide to share the city it should be done under a negotiated settlement, and to Israel's satisfaction and advantage.

Second, drive additional supplementary social aid like baby bonuses through the army. Wouldn't it be in Israel's interest to trade in controversial military systems for the benefit of soldiers and reservists who need help having three or more children? Take for instance the F-35 program; a squadron of 20 jets costs \$2.75B, and could be covered by American aid. However, based on a Canadian government estimate, upkeep alone on the same 20 jets over two decades would cost around \$6.8B. If the IDF simply gave \$20,000 for every newborn, to a family of three or more children, that could encourage an additional 247,000 births over that same 20-year period. Wouldn't 247,000 additional children have a greater strategic impact on the Palestinians than 20 jets? And, Israel has options for 75 more jets.

Third, alter child benefits to take into account geographic location of where the family lives. It is more expensive to raise children in Tel Aviv than it is in Beersheba or Umm El Fahm. So perhaps the government should have a sliding scale to equalize the cost of raising a family based on location and not just a simple head count.

Fourth, raise the standard of Arab Israeli education to closely mirror that of that of Jewish Israeli schools. A little less emphasis on Arab and Palestinian studies, and more emphasis on foreign languages, sciences and business. Higher and better education usually leads to more opportunity and smaller families.

Fifth, institute a non-resident tax on homes and apartments owned by foreigners. Make it high enough so that these occasional visitors will either sell or rent out their apartments. This should increase the supply of available homes and reduce the cost of living. Besides, the tax revenue of those non-residents who keep their homes will help Israel.

Six, the government needs to assume more control over conversions. Three or four percent of the population is listed as "other" in census results. These people and anyone else needs to be given a fair and realistic opportunity to become members of the Jewish nation.

Seven, Israel can do more to convince Jews and especially ex-pat Israelis to move to Israel, this should be a priority for the government.

We learned over the past decades that negotiating with the Palestinians was not as easy as we had hoped. Maybe we felt that their hopes and goals were the same as ours. The likelier scenario is that they aren't, and that they truly feel they will ultimately win by the simple weight of their fast growing population. Let us address that issue head on, and we may begin to see results that would be good for both sides.

