

Part 5 of 5

## For a glimpse of Israel's future, look not at Poland nor Hungary but at Afghanistan

*Israel has reached its demographic-democratic point of no return. At some point, the secular Netanyahu will be gone. Not so his Haredi and Jewish supremacist partners.*

by

Dan Ben-David

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An emergency webinar recently organized by the Israel Economic Association (which includes all of Israel's academic economists) and the International Economic Association, headed by Prof. Dani Rodrik from Harvard University, provided an illuminating glimpse of the steps taken by Turkey, Poland, Hungary and Russia in their descent from democracy toward authoritarian rule. Leading economists from each of these countries detailed the surprisingly similar routes taken in each of their countries until their citizenry finally understood what they had lost.

Rodrik, a prominent Jewish-American economist formerly from Turkey, summarized what was about to unfold in the webinar during his opening remarks. He highlighted what he referred to as the "authoritarian-populist playbook" that each of these countries followed. The process included four steps:

- Capture the judiciary and the media
- Identify and target the "enemy of the people"
- Create alternative reality through control of public narratives
- Concentrate power and establish one-man rule

This chillingly familiar playbook is so fully underway in Israel that it is no wonder so many Israelis voice concern about our nation going down those countries' path. But this is only a partial picture of the process now happening in Israel. The prime minister's criminal trial on corruption charges may be what opened the country's door to the authoritarian playbook. But demography

is the ultimate game-changer that will take Israel far beyond the Hungarian-Polish example to the Afghanistan model.

The five political parties that joined Netanyahu's Likud in creating the current government are even more gung-ho about demolishing Israel's democracy than Netanyahu because it conflicts with their underlying beliefs and lifestyles. Two of his so-called "natural partners," as Netanyahu likes to refer to them, are the haredi parties, United Torah Judaism and Shas. The other three are Jewish supremacist parties, Jewish Power (*Otzma Yehudit*), Religious Zionism, and Noam. The attempts of these five parties to appropriate Judaism and Israel's national symbols have been ongoing for years.

At some point, the secular Netanyahu will no longer be a part of Israel's political landscape. Not so with regard to his religious partners. Recognizing who and what these parties represent is key to understanding how Israel can avoid becoming Afghanistan.

The haredi leadership is determined to prevent its children from receiving an education that would provide them with opportunities in the marketplace that would reduce their dependency as adults on the ability of the political parties to channel scarce government budgets their way. This leadership ensures that haredim be shut off from all communication to the outside world to guarantee that they remain oblivious to such liberal fundamentals such as democracy, women's rights (not one woman is allowed to serve in either haredi party) and racism (toward other Jews, toward Arabs). The result is an attitude of intolerance and condescension to all who are unlike them – as is often evident in the resultant clashes when the haredi community expands into non-haredi neighborhoods and towns.

However, the primary victims of the haredi leadership are the haredim themselves. Aside from the dependency that is forced upon them is the norm of a crushing social ostracism for anyone daring to question the leadership – or for the remaining families of those who dare leave the haredi community.

And then there are the three Jewish supremacist parties. These are primarily graduates of Israeli religious (non-haredi) schools. While there are religious Jews who clearly abhor these

parties' racist tendencies, they are neither sufficiently vocal nor are they a sufficiently large group to have their own political representation.

The religious schools ostensibly teach math, science and English, but it is at very low levels – below 80% of the developed world countries (as shown previously in this series). Meirav Arlozorov notes in a recent four-part *The Marker* series on Israel's religious school stream that these schools differ markedly from the secular school stream. While political solicitation is prohibited in secular schools, political identification with the religious parties and their agendas is part and parcel of the religious stream schools, sending the children in organized school buses to political gatherings and protests of Israel's religious right. The curriculum of the religious stream's schools instills the importance of annexing the occupied territories – with no suggestion of the international illegality of such a move, nor any concept of the need to accord full equal rights to all of the inhabitants upon annexation. Not only do the school curricula differ between the religious and secular streams, but secular individuals are also barred from teaching in the religious schools – a policy of discrimination that is unheard of in the secular schools.

Consequently, the three parties representing the religious (non-haredi) Jewish community are led by, and composed of, racists and homophobes. Itamar Ben-Gvir, the head of the Jewish Power party was convicted repeatedly on charges of incitement to racism. The leader of the Religious Zionism party, Bezalel Smotrich, was arrested – but not tried – for being part of a Jewish terror cell, His tweeting in support of segregation of Arab and Jewish women in hospital maternity wards speaks for itself. And then there is Avi Maoz from the Noam party, who advocates gender segregation at public events, opposes LGBT rights and is a staunch supporter of legalizing so-called “conversion therapy” to coerce gays into becoming straight.

One of the guiding principles in a liberal democratic society is allowing each person the freedom of self-determination, as long as it does not infringe on the rights of others. Religious freedom is part and parcel of this concept – which brings us to present-day Israel.

The dominant feature of the haredi and religious parties comprising the current government is their intolerance toward alternative ideals – and oftentimes, laws. Unfortunately for them,

upholding these basic tenets of a liberal society is the role of the courts. Hence, these parties' first order of business is to weaken the courts' ability to limit their breaches of the law such as illegal evasion of the military draft by the haredim and unequal distribution of public funds to the haredim, as well as illegal settlements by the settlers and unequal distribution of funds to them.

While secular Jewish women give birth to an average of two children each, religious women average twice that number, and haredi women average 6.6 children each. The two latter population groups still do not comprise a majority of the voting public, but the demographic direction that Israel is headed should be clear to all.

Netanyahu's corruption trial and his desire to intimidate the courts into letting him off the hook made him politically untouchable for all of the other parties spanning the political spectrum from right to left. It is no wonder that he considers the only ones remaining, the haredi and the Jewish supremacist parties, as his "natural partners." But in the process, Israel has just received a promo of what the future will be like when the haredi and religious parties control the Knesset.

There can be no middle ground between intolerance and liberalism. Only one can prevail. The irony – and what gives liberal society its current advantage – is that the intolerant are completely dependent on the liberals. Only a liberal society that encourages freedom of thought and expression can provide the living standards, medical services, welfare assistance and national security that both the intolerant and liberals desire.

If we want to prevent the current promo that is being played out in the Knesset from becoming the full feature, it is incumbent on Israeli democracy to rise up and defend itself. I leave the mechanics of this civil unrest to others. But that defense needs to come with an immediate plan of action for the day after. Following Churchill, "Never let a good crisis go to waste."

Israel needs to completely overhaul its system of government. The executive branch should be able to lead and implement its rulings, alongside the creation of effective checks and balances with independent legislative and judicial branches. Also a must – a constitution setting in stone the national foundations that will protect the country's basic institutions and minimize future destabilization attempts.

But these actions are not enough. They will not affect the future character of the nation – which, in turn, will determine its long-term viability. Without a complete overhaul of Israel’s education system (along the lines outlined in the previous article in this series), the country’s future will be a Jewish version of Afghanistan, an inhospitable place that our children and grandchildren will not want to live in, a racist country that is a pariah in the international community. But that will only be a passing stage. Such a country situated in the most inhospitable region of the world will not be able to defend itself – with all of the existential implications that this has on the future of the only home that the Jewish people have.

It is possible that the most recent elections mark the beginning of Israeli society’s last stage of the demographic process – but this does not have to be the case. Israel has a long history of dealing with its fundamental problems at the last possible minute. What is different in this case is that it will not be possible to press the undo button in the future to turn unskilled and poorly educated adults into children who, in the next round, will learn what is required in order to save their own future – and ours.

We have reached Israel’s demographic-democratic point of no-return. What we decide today will determine if Israel will be the home for our children, and the safe haven for our people.