

Israel's most important weapon is in danger

by

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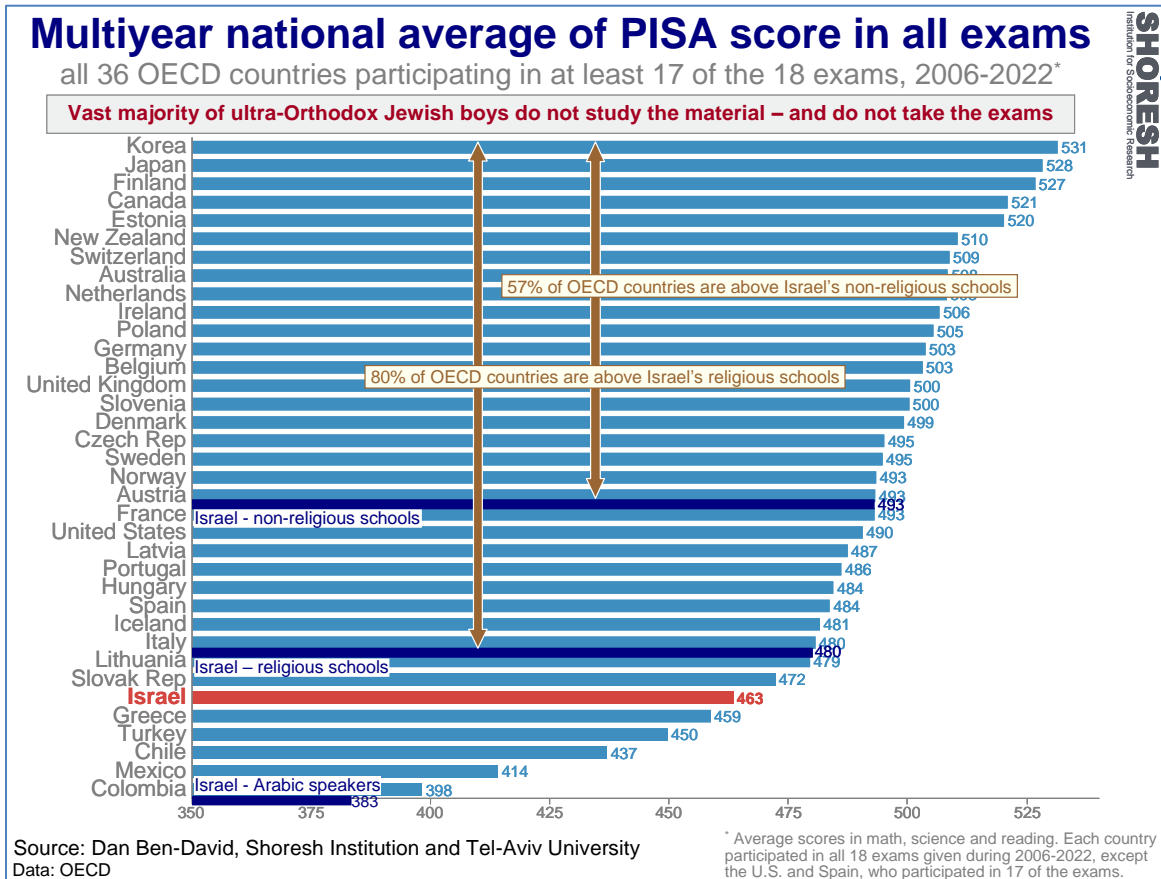
Sophisticated beeper attacks and the interception of missiles on a massive scale are made possible by technology developed by people who received a good education. In light of the security challenges that we'll face in the future, given that half of Israel's children are today receiving a third-world education and belong to the fastest-growing population groups, Israel will not become a failed state in a few decades. It will simply cease to exist.

The issue of a core curriculum within Israel has tended to center around whether such studies should be made mandatory for Haredi (ultra-Orthodox) schoolchildren – as is the case for other children in Israel, and in other developed countries. Unfortunately, this domestic debate has been detached from the overarching question on the quality of the core education received by those Israeli pupils who actually do study it. As the only country in the world that is threatened with – and has experienced – attempts at its annihilation, the importance of knowledge as a unique weapon that keeps us alive cannot be overstated. Among other things, that knowledge that enabled the interception of missiles on a scale humanity has never witnessed before, and the simultaneous explosion of thousands of pagers and mobile devices that were Hezbollah's alternative to mobile phones.

The children who will need to have the knowledge required to ensure Israel's future are sitting in classrooms today – and that's a source of great concerns.

Comparing Israeli results with those in the other developed countries that administer the international PISA exams, since 2006, indicates just how low the achievements of Israeli pupils have been over the years in core subjects: mathematics, science, and reading (first graph). It should be noted that Haredi boys do not study these subjects and do not take these exams. Had they done so, Israel's national score would be even lower.

Pupils in the secular-Jewish school system have scored below the majority of OECD countries, according to the average results of all PISA exams from 2006 to 2022. Pupils in the



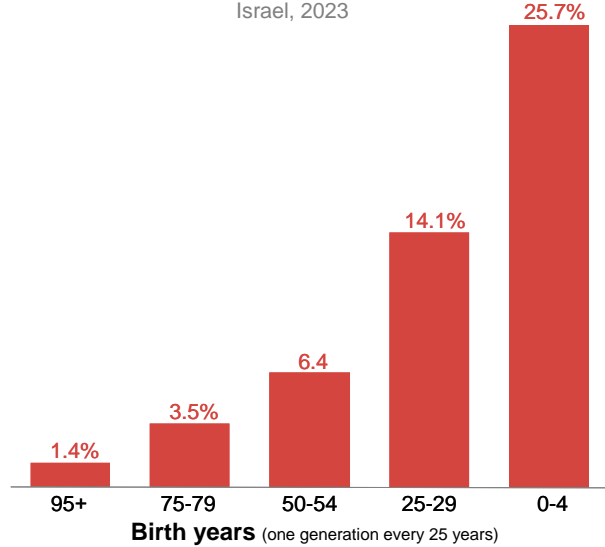
religious-Jewish (non-Haredi) school system have done even worse, coming in below 80 percent of OECD countries, and Israel's Arabic-speaking pupils rank below many third-world countries.

These very problematic outcomes are exacerbated by the state of education in the Haredi community – or, more precisely, by Haredi leaders who leverage their political power to effectively prevent any knowledge relevant to working in a global labor market and maintaining a liberal democracy from reaching Haredi boys. Moreover, the national impact of their lack of knowledge is amplified by the fact that Haredi fertility rates are roughly three times higher than those of secular Jews, traditional Jews, Arab Christians, and Druze. They are double the fertility rates of Israel's Arab Muslims, and are two-thirds higher than those of religious non-Haredi Jews. Consequently, the Haredi share in Israel's population is doubling every 25 years – in other words, every generation (second graph).

While Haredi men aged 50-54 currently make up 6% of Israel's population, their grandchildren aged 0-4 are already 26% of all Israeli toddlers. As the population share of Haredi boys – who do not study the relevant material and do not participate in exams – continues to grow at a rapidly increasing (i.e. exponential) pace, the average achievement of Israeli pupils taking the PISA exams,

Share of Haredim in each generation

Israel, 2023

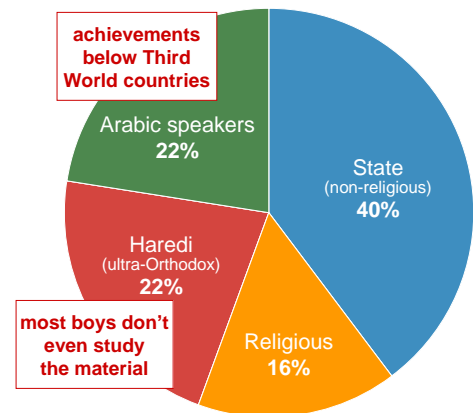


Source: Dan Ben-David, Shores Institute and Tel-Aviv University
Data: Israel Democracy Institute (2023)

which is already below all relevant developed countries, will be less and less reflective of the actual average national knowledge level of all Israeli pupils.

Today, 22% of Israel's first-graders are in Arabic-language schools, and another 22% are in Haredi schools (third graph). In addition, there are many non-Haredi Jewish children in Israel's geographic and social peripheries who also receive a very low quality education. In other words, about half of Israel's children are receiving a third-world education, and they belong to the fastest-growing segments of the population. As adults, they will only be able to maintain an economy that matches their third-world skills. But a third-world economy cannot sustain first-world health, welfare, and defense systems. In lieu of an advanced military to defend it in the most violent region on Earth, future Israel will not become a third-world nation; it will simply cease to exist.

Distribution of pupils in 1st grade, 2023



Source: Dan Ben-David, Shores Institute and Tel-Aviv University
Data: Central Bureau of Statistics

Israel can still pivot away from this track to a sustainable trajectory, but there exists a demographic-democratic point of no return. After that, laws that are already difficult to pass in the Knesset will become impossible to enact. The people of Israel must understand and internalize the severity of the picture presented here and the speed at which changes are occurring.

We need a government that will replace sectoral and personal agendas with national priorities, a government that can distinguish between superficial and core problems. Specifically, Israel needs a government with the courage to set aside left-right, religious-secular, Arab-Jewish divides and save our ship before we become the Titanic. It is in our hands, and this is a clarion call for all hands on deck!