

Despair, unfeasible separation from the Haredim, or an Israel 2.0 roadmap

by

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Some are giving up. Others are leaning toward the illusion of dividing Israel into cantons of different population groups – even though the idea is unsustainable because it sidesteps the nation's fundamental domestic issues. However, there are also the four cornerstones of the Israel 2.0 Roadmap, which focus on the country's root problems and could save its future – if we're able to harness the public anger against the current default whose existential implications are becoming clearer day by day.

Many among us have already given up on the possibility that we can truly continue living together in this country – with the recent Haredi attempts at draft evasion during wartime only emphasizing the deepness of our domestic chasm. Outrageous patchwork policies substituting for strategy have been the hallmarks of one failed government after another. Kicking the can to subsequent generations has created the trajectory upon which the State of Israel has been moving along for decades – and at an increasing speed over the past two years. It's an unsustainable trajectory that has led some to give up and leave, or to considering leaving. Their destination: countries that have recently begun to remind us why our parents built the Israeli miracle here for us in the first place – reestablishing, after two thousand years, a collective home that enables us to defend ourselves in a concentrated and successful manner.

Despair is not an action plan. Others, however, do have a plan, one that is based on the division of the country into cantons, as if we were Switzerland: with each canton living as it wishes. The idea may sound appealing, but as will be shown below, it's not built upon solid economic, social, or security foundations that can hold up over the years. As the storm around us rages, there is no avoiding the fact that a country desiring life must candidly face and genuinely confront the root problems jeopardizing its future existence – and to do so before the demographic window of opportunity closes. Such a framework marking the way forward is presented here.

The cantonization illusion

The notion of cantons is particularly appealing to those unwilling to genuinely confront the root problems that have been determining Israel's direction for decades. The primary idea underlying this approach is to divide the country into cantons according to the majority populations in each area, with those populations determining for themselves: the degree of internal democracy, if any; lifestyles of work or non-work; schools that provide, or do not provide, the tools to work in a modern economy, that teach or do not teach the fundamentals of liberal democracies and respect for others; as well as determination of taxes and public expenditures. In addition to canton leadership, there will be a federal, nationwide government with little influence on what happens within the cantons, with each canton having equal representation in the national Knesset.

There are different variants of the Israeli canton initiative, but the guiding principle is that each population group needs to respect the values of the other groups for the national model to succeed. Also, the strong cantons are to assist in funding the weaker cantons, with such funding to

decrease over time. This decrease is intended to encourage weaker cantons to understand that if their model is not economically sustainable, they will need to change it accordingly.

The first basic problem of Israeli cantonization is security: who will defend all the cantons from those who want to annihilate the entire country? How is the canton idea different from current reality in this context? The second basic problem is economic: those who do not provide a proper education for their children will not have future adults capable of implementing a turnaround if and when it becomes clear that aid from the other cantons has ended.

The prevailing illusion that a Haredi education suffices for attaining academic degrees, even in lieu of a complete and high-quality core curriculum as children, shatters in the face of reality. According to the State Comptroller, 53% of Haredi women and 76% of Haredi men drop out from the academic track. It is important to emphasize that these high dropout rates are not from research universities but from generally low-quality non-research colleges.

If a population unable to sustain itself is reduced to hunger, the pressure on the other cantons to continue funding it, despite previous agreements, will increase (sounds familiar?). Otherwise the destitute will be forced against their will to steal from those who have, in order to subsist and remain alive. And what about health services among those who do not prepare their children to follow in the footsteps of Maimonides, who was a physician, and do not have the ability to fund medical treatment provided in the other cantons?

All this raises the third, and perhaps the primary, problem. What makes people think that a canton that is not democratic in the way it determines its leaders – one that is based on discrimination against women and intolerance of all who are unlike them – will adhere to democratic rules of the game with the other cantons? To some extent, Jerusalem and other towns that are becoming Haredi (ultra-Orthodox) serve as an example of the entire country's direction and the dangers of the canton idea as a future option for Israel.

Jerusalem and the increasingly Haredi towns: A parable for Israel

In a little over three decades (from 1988 to 2021), the share of pupils in Jerusalem's secular primary schools plummeted from 33% to 9%. By 2021, almost half (46%) of primary school pupils in the city were Haredim, a third were Arabs, and 11% studied in religious Jewish (non-Haredi) schools (which also experienced a decline – albeit relatively moderate compared to the secular schools – in its share of total pupils). As a result of Jerusalem's rapidly changing demographics, and their implications for the city's tax base, the Israeli government is forced to channel increasing budgets to help keep the city afloat. For illustration, between 2012 and 2020, the city's tax revenues rose by 34% while its income from the Israeli government grew by 138%.

In 1995, the Central Bureau of Statistics ranked Jerusalem in a medium socioeconomic cluster (rankings range from the poorest towns in cluster one to the wealthiest towns in cluster ten). Within just two and a half decades, the city dropped by three clusters, from cluster five to cluster two by 2019. This is not a phenomenon that characterized Tel Aviv, which remained in its relatively high cluster eight level throughout the entire period. Haifa (cluster seven) and Be'er Sheva (cluster five) also remained in their same socioeconomic clusters between 1995 and 2019.

In general, Israel's Central Bureau of Statistics classified over 200 municipalities according to their socioeconomic status. Some of these exhibited improvement over the years while others remained constant or declined. Jerusalem, along with three other towns, experienced the largest drop in socioeconomic classification – each of them falling by three clusters (see first graph).

One of these towns, Beit Shemesh, was ranked in cluster five in 1995 and dropped to cluster two by 2019, similar to Jerusalem. Arad dropped from cluster six to cluster three during the same period, while Giv'at Ze'ev was ranked in cluster eight (like Haifa) in 1995 and dropped to cluster five over the years. The Haredi towns of Beitar Ilit and Modiin Ilit are already in cluster 1, the direction that the other towns are rapidly heading toward.

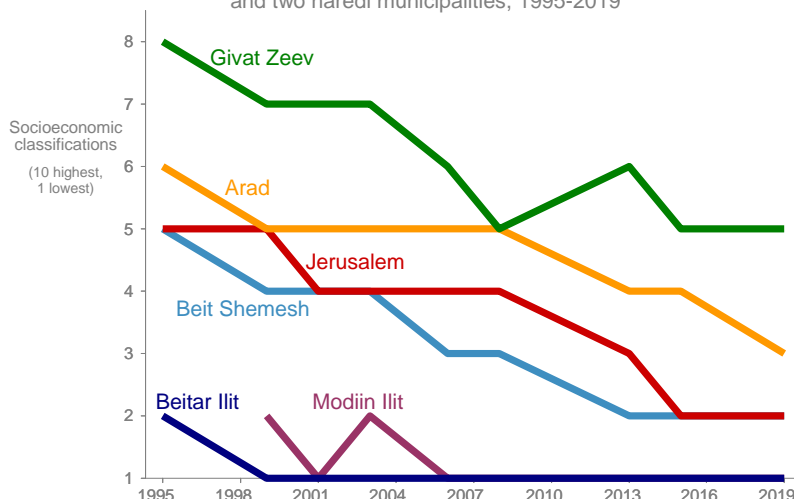
The particularly high birth rate among the Haredim necessitates finding housing solutions for the society that is growing faster than any other population group in Israel. This is due to a fertility rate (6.4 children per woman) that is significantly higher than that of all other population groups in the country: 3.8 among religious non-Haredi Jews, 3.0 among Muslims, 2.4 among traditional Jews, 2.0 among secular Jews, 1.9 among the Druze, and 1.8 among Christians. As a result, the proportion of Haredim in Israel's population doubles every 25 years – that is, in each generation. For example, the Haredim constitute 6% of those aged 50-54, but are already 26% of their 0-4 year old grandchildren.

Consequently, the Haredim require more and more areas to live. Alongside towns built exclusively for the Haredim, like Beitar Ilit and Modi'in Ilit, there is significant migration of Haredim into towns that were not previously Haredim. Beit Shemesh, Arad, and Giv'at Ze'ev, who have exhibited the most significant socioeconomic declines, have also experienced huge and very rapid increases in their Haredi populations.

As shown in the second graph, over a third (36%) of Beit Shemesh's primary school pupils were enrolled in the Haredi stream in 2000, with a little over a quarter (26%) in the secular Jewish stream, while the remainder (37%) were in the religious Jewish (non-Haredi) stream. By 2024, the proportion of Haredi pupils in Beit Shemesh rose to 85%, and the share of pupils in the secular schools dropped to just 4%.

Four municipalities suffering the greatest reduction (3 units) in socioeconomic classification

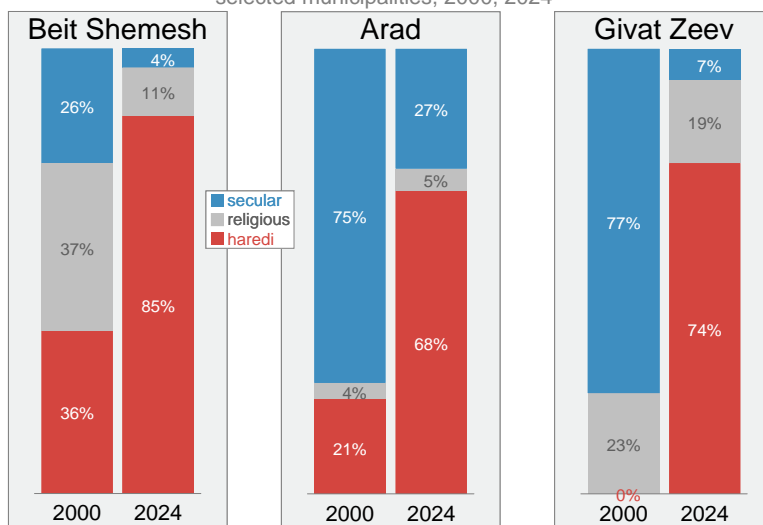
and two haredi municipalities, 1995-2019



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

Primary school pupils by education stream as share of total pupils in municipality*

selected municipalities, 2000, 2024



Source: Dan Ben-David, Shores Institution and Tel-Aviv University
Data: Education Ministry

In 2000, Arad was a relatively secular town. Three-quarters of its primary school pupils attended the secular Jewish stream, and only 21% were in the Haredi stream. Within just 24 years, the demographic distribution was reversed, with the Haredi stream's share rising to 68% and the secular stream dropping to just 27%. In Giv'at Ze'ev, there were no Haredi schools at the beginning of the millennium. In less than two and a half decades, the share of pupils in its secular schools collapsed from 77% to 7%, while the Haredi share reached 74%.

The remarkably quick tectonic demographic changes in the towns becoming increasingly Haredi are due not only to inward migration of Haredim because of their high natural growth. They also stem from the intolerance of the Haredim – who are not educated otherwise – toward anyone who is not like them. The result is a free fall in the towns' more educated secular populations, and consequently, of those who contribute more economically.

This is the key issue that Israel's cantonization proponents ignore. As I have emphasized in the past, [one can be a religious person in a liberal country – but one cannot be a liberal person in a religious country](#). Israel's rapidly changing demographics will not enable cantons to remain in their original size, while the lack of a market-compatible and a democratic-compatible education will not enable the Haredi canton to free itself from dependence on the other cantons for its economic survival and its physical defense. As such, the cantonization proposal produces the same existential outcome that Israel is already headed toward.

Since neither Israel's current trajectory, nor the idea of cantons, is sustainable in the long term, there is little choice left but to try a third way: the Israel 2.0 roadmap. This roadmap has four cornerstones that address the root problems and ensure Israel's future.

Israel 2.0 Roadmap

Cornerstones 1 and 2 of the roadmap outline significant policy changes that will enable high living standards in a growing economy alongside low poverty rates – an advanced economy capable of ensuring Israel's ability to defend itself in the future. Cornerstones 3 and 4 are necessary to consolidate cornerstones 1 and 2 so that Israel remains on the sustainable path.

1. Overhauling the education system

As I showed a few months ago, [Israel's level of education in core subjects is at the bottom of the developed world](#) (this is not because of the Haredim, most of whose boys do not study the material and therefore are not tested – which would have lowered the national average even more). As such, the emphasis should be on overhauling the entire system and not focusing solely on the Haredim.

- Israel has cutting-edge research universities. The knowledge is already here; there is no need to import it from other countries. We just need to ensure that this knowledge reaches all the country's children. High quality universal education will be a game-changer. The main elements of the upheaval should include:
 - A significant upgrade of the core curriculum across the entire system;
 - The core curriculum must be uniform and compulsory in all schools, including each religious and haredi school;
 - A fundamental change in how teachers are selected, trained, and compensated;
 - A comprehensive reform of the Ministry of Education and its operations;

- An absolute prohibition on political parties' involvement in the content taught in the education system.
- Children with a firm grasp of the basic skills will have opportunities for economic and social mobility that they might not otherwise have, while contributing to economic growth at the national level and reducing their personal dependency on others.
- A common top-tier basic education will provide a clear understanding of the dos and don'ts of a liberal society – regardless of personal preferences along the religious-secular spectrum – teaching the type of critical thinking that will diminish the appeal of populist and charlatan leaders proposing simplistic and dangerous solutions to complex existential problems.
- Better educated adults will also understand the incumbent requirements and personal responsibilities of parenthood and will be more judicious in their fertility decisions.

2. Overhauling governmental budgetary priorities

- including:
 - Complete cessation of funding to schools that do not teach the full core curriculum;
 - Discontinuation of benefits that incentivize non-work lifestyles;
 - Full budgetary transparency so that the public will know what are Israel's actual national priorities – and among them, who the government supports and how much they receive.
- Money, or the withholding of it, encourages compliance with the rule of law and spurs willingness to accept an education overhaul, to work, and to defend the nation.
- The massive change required in budgetary priorities should be based on a national agenda rather than on sectoral and personal ones – a national agenda that will eliminate the biased and unequal system of benefits, subsidies, discounts and exemptions.

3. Electoral reform

- The ability to pass and implement overhauls of the magnitude described above requires a government comprising cabinet ministers who understand what their ministries do within an executive branch capable of implementing its decisions and enforcing laws;
- Establishment of effective checks and balances between the three branches of government to ensure that no lines are crossed.

4. Drafting and ratifying a constitution

- To make it more difficult for subsequent governments to overturn the systemic overhauls in education and budgetary priorities, there is a need to draft and ratify a constitution that entrenches national foundations protecting fundamental rights and the new system of government.
- Given the rapidness of Israel's demographic changes, this constitution needs to hold for at least the next two or three decades – until the overhauls in education and

benefits begin to have an effect on future generations, so that there will not be a future majority in Israel interested in weakening Israel's democratic foundations.

The social, economic and political processes that Israel has been undergoing in recent decades have brought the nation to its moment of truth. While many Israelis may recognize the symptoms, most do not grasp the full picture depicted above, nor the fact that this picture is changing at an increasing pace – with existential implications for Israel's future.

The Israel 2.0 roadmap bridges liberal right and left, as well as liberal religious and secular individuals – and they still comprise a majority in the country, if they just come together as they do in war. After all, the goal is the same, saving Israel's future. In the most recent national elections, 1.2 million voted for the Haredi and Jewish supremacist parties. In contrast, about 3 million voted for non-religious Jewish parties and about half a million for Arab parties. Among the 3 million who voted for the non-religious Jewish parties, there are nonetheless many who view as enemies of the state high-tech workers, physicians, scientists, and fighter pilots opposing Netanyahu and his partners in pushing for the judicial coup. But they, together with the Haredim and supremacists, still constitute a minority – though not forever, given Israel's demographic direction.

This summer, together with colleagues from the Shores Institution, I presented the cornerstones of the Israel 2.0 roadmap to each of Israel's opposition leaders, those leading parties and those intending to establish them (such briefings were also offered to the Prime Minister, the Finance Minister, and the Education Minister, but only the latter agreed to meet). Each of the opposition leaders, from the right to the left of the political spectrum, expressed agreement with the roadmap. The problem is that the roadmap is so difficult to implement politically that it requires (a) a coming together of the political leadership willing to set aside sectoral differences and reaching public agreement on the roadmap, and (b) the unification of Israel's liberal majority around the roadmap's principles – which requires shifting the public discourse to the issues described above. This is why I am writing these lines.

Everything begins with replacement of the current captain and his team, who are only accelerating our advance toward the iceberg ahead of us. It also requires that we stop arguing about the rearrangement of deck chairs on the Titanic and start jointly setting an irreversible change of course for the ship. Otherwise, that iceberg will be the end of us all – or for those seeking temporary lifeboats abroad, it will be the freezing waters when these boats overturn on them or their children when they have no mother ship to return to.

To all the leaders of the opposition: this is a time for leaders capable of putting aside partisan and personal considerations, of coming together to lead protests like the country has never seen before. Only together can you stop the poison machine assembled by the prime minister, which is leading to the social, economic, and diplomatic destruction of Israel. Show that men and women from the right and left, religious and secular sides of the political map, can unite as citizens – as they do in the IDF – for the common paramount goal of saving Israel's future. Give hope!

Action plan

It's time to think outside the box. Just as the IDF has recently demonstrated that it is possible to carry out missions previously considered impossible, Israel's opposition leaders need to take action and do something that has never been done in Israel.

1. Establish, on a one-time basis, a single joint political confederation of the entire opposition (a kind of civilian IDF).
2. This temporary political party should present a clear, joint political platform based solely on the four cornerstones of the Israel 2.0 roadmap on which all of the opposition leaders agree.
3. Implement the plan during the new government's first year in office.
4. At the end of the first year, dissolve the Knesset. We'll then go to elections under the new system – and finally embark on a new, sustainable, path.

Readers, take the Israel 2.0 roadmap, share it with anyone you can, and press your leaders of choice to unite and provide a common vision to save Israel's future – a vision that distinguishes between the wheat and the chaff, and addresses the root problems threatening the Israel's future existence. The time has come for restoring hope.